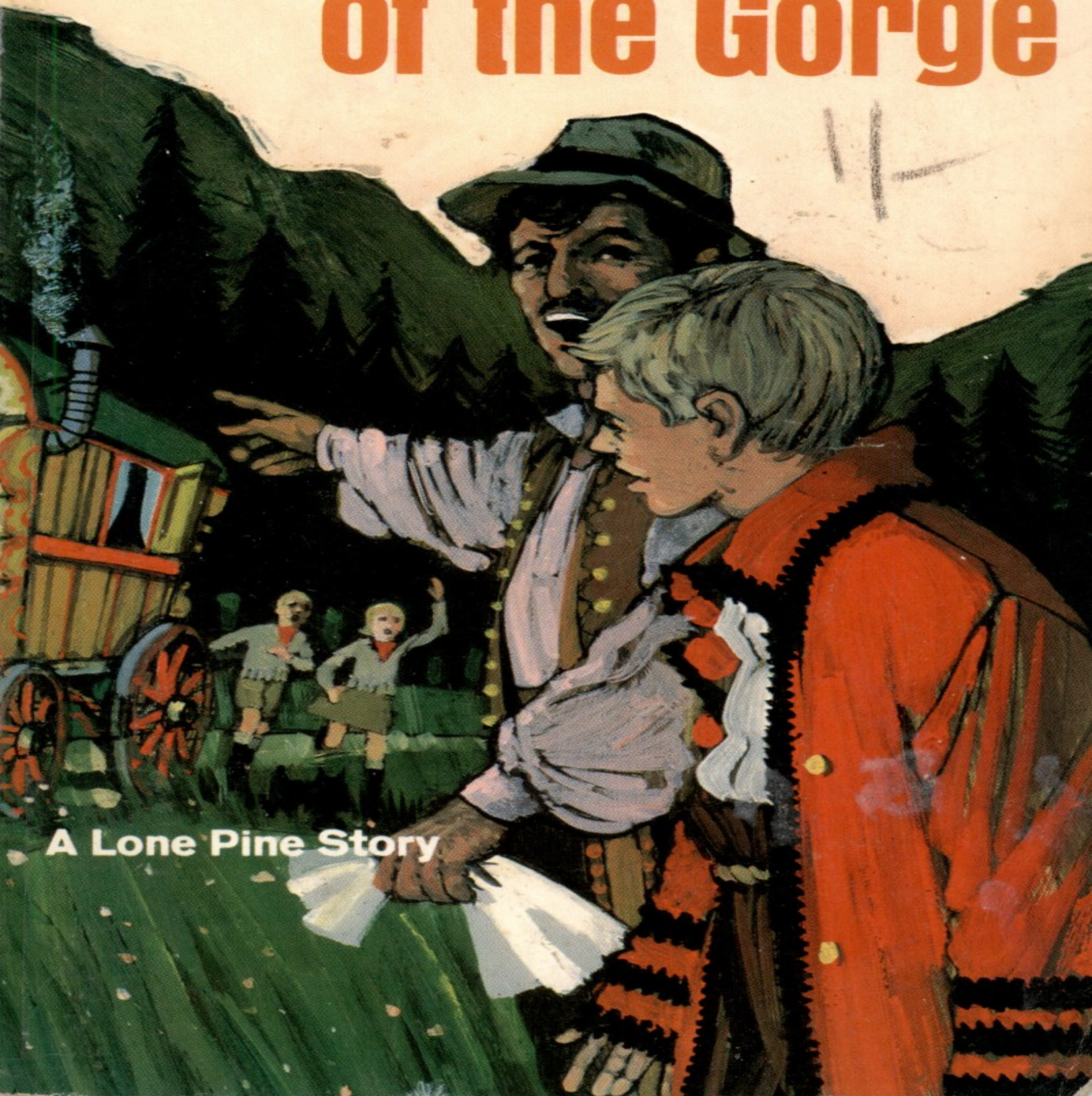




Malcolm Saville

The Secret of the Gorge



A Lone Pine Story

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Malcolm Saville

The Secret of The Gorge

Foreword

On the borders of the counties of Shropshire and Hereford, where the River Teme is joined by its tributary the Clun, you may find the village of Leintwardine. It is not very easy to discover although it lies on a road along which the Roman legions once marched, but it is worth it when you get there. A few miles from the village the lovely river runs unexpectedly into a limestone gorge overshadowed by trees and strong-smelling elders, thick with creamy blossom in the summer, and heavy with purple fruit a few months later. Through this gorge the river runs smooth, fast and deep for half a mile until it swirls under an old bow bridge. If you can find the gorge, be careful how you cross this bridge, for it was in very bad condition when I was last there and saw the sparkling water through holes in the rotting timber.

Once past the bridge the Teme wanders away from the limestone cliffs through a pleasant meadow before tumbling into another gorge where there is a ruined water-mill and a cottage surrounded by nettles.

You may find these places for yourself, as the Lone Piners did. When you walk down the track that leads into the gorge at its southern end you will see something very strange, for here the river is crossed by enormous iron pipes carrying water for Birmingham from the great dams in the Elan Valley in Wales.

It is in the country round about this gorge that this story of the Lone Piners is set, and because you can go there yourself I must tell you what is real and what is not. The gorge, the aqueduct, the old bridge, the mill and the cottage are real. There is no village of Bringewood Chase, although if you find Leintwardine you can imagine that Bringewood would be more or less in the same position. There is no inn called the *Two Bells* and no old house like Bringewood Manor. Neither is there a village called Barton Beach away to the north, although the Stiperstones are real enough. All the people mentioned in the story are imaginary.

M. S.

The People in the Story

Harry Sentence: (known for many years as William Johnson) once a butler at Bringewood Manor

Harriet Brown: (deceased) once housekeeper at the Manor

Nicholas Whiteflower: Aged twelve

Margaret Whiteflower: Nicholas' aunt and only relative

Simon Blandish: Landlord of the *Two Bells* at Bringewood Chase

Maggie Blandish: His wife

Sydney Blandish: their eighteen-year-old son

Marilyn: Sydney's girl-friend

Mrs. Quickseed: Owner of the cottage in Barton Beach where the Whiteflowers lodge

And the Lone Piners and their relations and friends.

The boys and girls known as the Lone Piners who are featured in this story have had ten previous adventures. If this is the first you have read you will probably enjoy it more if you know something about the Lone Pine Club, which was founded at a lonely house called Witchend in the heart of the Shropshire hills. Readers who have known the members for some time have asked that they should not grow up from book to book, so they continue to have adventures at their present ages.

The rules of the club are still hidden under the solitary pine tree in their first secret camp. They are very simple and are set out in full in *Mystery at Witchend*, which is the first Lone Pine story. All the members signed the oath in his or her own blood - *Every member of the Lone Pine Club signed*

below swears to keep the rules and to be true to each other whatever happens always.

The headquarters of the club is still the original camp with its sentinel tree on the slopes of the hill above Witchend, but there is another in the old barn at the farm called Seven Gates where they go first in this adventure. Here are the Lone Piners you will meet in this story:

DAVID MORTON. Aged sixteen. Captain of the club. Lives in London and is still at boarding school. Not particularly brainy, but above the average at work and games and thoroughly dependable. Witchend belongs to his parents. It is their holiday home to which they come whenever they can.

RICHARD ("DICKIE") MORTON and MARY MORTON are ten-year-old twins. They go to separate schools but are inseparable in the holidays. Although often infuriating to the older members of the club, they have proved their worth in all the Lone Piner's adventures. Alike in looks and speech they have a maddening trick of pretending to be younger than they are, and when in action together they annoy most grown-ups. They get their own way too often, but they are warm-hearted, loyal and courageous and will tackle anything to justify themselves to the other members of the club, who forgive them much for David's sake.

PETRONELLA ("PETER") STERLING is sixteen and the Vice-Captain of the club. She has no mother, brothers or sisters but lives with her father, who is in charge of a reservoir called Hatchholt, near Witchend. She goes to school in Shrewsbury but is never happier than when she is roaming her beloved hills on her pony, Sally. She is tall and slim with two fair plaits which she refuses to cut off, blue eyes and a clear brown skin. Nobody could have a more straightforward and loyal friend than Peter, who is admired by all who know her.

JENNY HARMAN is just fifteen. She was born in Shropshire and has never been out of the county. She lives with her father and stepmother in the Post Office and General Store in a little village called Barton Beach in the shadow of a rugged range of hills called the Stiperstones. Peter once befriended her when she was in great trouble. Although the others tease her

she has plenty of pluck and does not mind what anyone else says or does so long as Tom will stand by her.

TOM INGLES is sixteen. He was born, and lived most of his life, in London. Now he is settled on his uncle's farm near Witchend. Everyone likes Tom for his quick wit, and although he pretends that he's grown out of the club, he is really proud of his membership and his friendship with the others. He is always Jenny's champion.

1. The Man with the Scar

It was nearly noon when the bus from Ludlow rounded the corner of the main street of the village of Bringewood Chase. The August sun blazed down from a clear blue sky and under the arches of the old stone bridge the waters of the River Teme trickled sluggishly. There had been no rain for a fortnight and day by day the level of the water had sunk, until now the stones of its bed gleamed white and smooth in the sunshine.

The bus stopped under the shade of the elm trees by the bridge. The two women who first alighted obviously lived in the village. They had travelled into Ludlow on the first bus, done their shopping together and come back together. They had been talking when they got on and they were still talking as they walked up the village street together.

The third passenger was a man. He was tall and spare, with stooping shoulders and was most unsuitably dressed for a hot day in a suit of brown tweeds and a cap to match. His face was lined and tanned and he wore a pair of old-fashioned steel-rimmed spectacles. He stepped carefully down from the bus and looked round curiously. It was now to be seen that he was wearing black boots and carrying a heavy canvas grip. Then he glanced at the bus crew as if to ask a question, decided against doing so, walked stiffly to the bridge and leaned over the parapet. He pushed his cap to the back of his head. The band had left a red mark across his forehead. His hair was thick and white.

He watched the water for a while and then looked up. In the meadow across the river young Hereford cattle were grazing. A row of willows on the bank drooped lazily towards the water and away in the hazy distance were the blue Welsh hills. It was a pleasant scene, in which the elderly man in the brown suit looked out of place. Then two other people came over the bridge - a youth of about eighteen in a pair of tight black trousers and a garish checked shirt, and a pretty fair girl of about the same age dressed in scarlet jeans. She looked at the old man, sniggered and then nudged her companion, who guffawed and made a rude remark that must have been overheard.

The stranger's expression did not change and he stayed there in the hot sun until the boy and the girl had disappeared up the street and the bus had left on its return journey. Then he lifted his heavy bag, pulled his cap forward and walked slowly up the sunny side of the street.

Outside the inn called *The Evening Star* he put down his bag again and carefully read the menu on the door post. Apparently he didn't like what was offered, or perhaps it was the price of the meal which sent him shambling off again until he reached a turning on the right which led him into a narrow street. The houses here were little more than cottages and most of them were shabby. The only shop was a greengrocer's, but at the far end on the left the man in the brown suit saw the sign of another inn. When he was close enough he realized that the sign had not been cleaned for years. At first he thought the artist had painted two dirty yellow pears or oddly shaped oranges on the sign, but after more study he realized that the place was called *Two Bells*.

The paint was peeling from the open door and the stone step was dirty. Someone inside was playing a jazz record. A black and white piebald cat minced delicately over the step and pushed itself, purring loudly, against the stranger's tweedy trousers. The man took no notice but looked carefully up and down the little street.

Then the stranger glanced at the name painted over the door of the inn and stepped over the threshold into a stone-flagged passage. After the hot sunshine outside the place seemed chilly. The air smelled stale and faintly of food cooked a long time ago. The whole place was dirty and uncared for but it seemed to suit the stranger better than *The Evening Star*, for he walked straight into the room on the left of the passage.

The bar was empty, so the man dropped the heavy grip on the floor, walked over to the counter and rang the bell standing on it. A door at the back opened and a man came in. He was plump, pale and bald and he looked as grubby and uncared for as his inn. He was in his shirt sleeves and without collar and tie, and as he stared at the man in the brown suit a muscle in his face twitched so that he seemed to be winking.

The stranger spoke first. "Morning to you," he said in a harsh voice with an unusual twang. "You the boss here? Name of Blandish?"

The fat man nodded. "How do you know my name?" he asked softly.

"Painted over the door... I want a room for a few nights. I like it here. Like a quiet place. Just a room and breakfast, and maybe an evening meal when I'm in. What do you charge?"

"No rooms to let here, mister. Nobody wants to stay here and anyway we're packing up soon. Clearing out. This place is no good. Dead. No business. Sorry, mister. Why not try the *Star*?"

"Wouldn't come here if I wanted the *Star*. I like your place. It's quiet. I'll be no trouble and I'll pay reasonable. What's your price?"

Simon Blandish stepped close to the counter, switched on a light over the bar and looked carefully at the man in the brown suit. He couldn't remember when anyone had last asked to stay at the *Two Bells*.

"Stranger here, aren't you? D'you know this place? It's been dead for years."

"See here, Mr. Blandish. Either you want my money or you don't. I want a room and a bed and two meals a day. Nothing special. Just what you'd have yourself. I'm touring. Nobody to please but myself. I like the country round here. Maybe I'll do a bit of fishing but I want quiet. No fuss. I'll be out all day."

"What's your name, mister? Where do you come from?"

"William Johnson - I'm from down south. Let's get this settled businesslike. What about a week's cash in advance, Mr. Blandish?" and he took a bulging wallet from his pocket, put it on the counter and flipped out a crisp £10 note. Blandish's pale eyes widened with surprise. The wallet was crammed with notes!

As Johnson held the note between his thick fingers and lifted it towards the light, Blandish saw on the back of his hand a long white scar stretching

from the knuckle of the middle finger to his wrist.

"Wait here, Mr. Johnson. I'll have a word with the missus," but before he was through the door the note was in his pocket.

Johnson went over to the window and stared into the sunlit street. His lined, tanned face showed neither impatience, annoyance, nor curiosity. He seemed content to wait for something he wanted very much, but why he should want to stay in this dirty, second-rate inn when he had a pocketful of money was more than anyone seeing him for the first time would be likely to guess. There was certainly something unusual about him. It was not that he was foreign as much as that he didn't look quite at home in an English village. His ill-fitting brown tweed suit looked as if it had either been bought second-hand or was very old.

He sat down, took out his wallet and counted through the packet of notes. There were plenty. There were steps on the stairs. He put the wallet away quickly and was gazing absently through the dusty window when Blandish and a woman came into the room.

This is the missus," Blandish said shortly. "She looks after the house and letting and the like. Better ask her and let her know how long you'll be wanting to stay."

Mrs. Blandish was a handsome, untidy woman, but as soon as she spoke the stranger guessed that not much would happen at the *Two Bells* without her knowledge or consent. Her hair was dark and her eyes were bold, and she wore gold rings in her ears like a gypsy. She moved between Johnson and the window so that she could see him in the light while her own face was in shadow. For a long half-minute they stared at each other.

"Good morning, sir," the woman said at last. "You was wanting a room and two meals a day, my husband tells me."

"That's right. I'd like to see my room now. Just let me know the reckoning. You can have the money now - week in advance if that's O.K."

"We don't let rooms here, mister. We're closing down next week. This village is dead... What's your name, sir, and where do you come from, just in case I was sorry for you and we made you up a bed for a night or two... Come from down south, Simmy says."

For the first time since he had got off the bus more than half an hour ago the stranger's face showed some expression. He looked annoyed.

"Now see here, Mrs. Blandish. Never mind where I come from. I want to stay here. I want quiet and no fuss and no interference. Maybe I'll only be here a few days, but if you're moving out soon I reckon you could do with some money... Here's another £5 and with what I gave your husband that should see us through the first week."

The woman took the £5 note. "If I was to say you could stay-----"

At that moment a lorry drew up outside. Three workmen got out and strolled into the inn before the Blandishes and Johnson could get over their surprise.

"Morning all," said a little dark man in a beret as he went up to the bar and ordered drinks. "Not much going on in this part o' the world, I must say. Anybody living in this dump do anything...? Anybody in the village alive yet? Here you are, Charlie. All the best... Cheers, Tom."

Nobody except his two mates answered him and their reply was only an acknowledgment. Mr. Johnson looked at them with distaste. He was sure now that nobody in their senses would ever want to drink in this grubby place, and these men were obviously strangers. He looked out of the window to see what was written on the lorry - SANDERS AND SON - House Breakers and Contractors, he read.

The little dark man was speaking to Blandish. "Where's Bringewood Manor, guv'nor? We come from Wolverhampton way and we've got to have a look at it. We're going to knock it down. New houses to be built up there presently, but we got to find the place first."

Before anyone could answer Johnson strode across the room and faced the man who had last spoken. Mrs. Blandish followed him.

"What's that you said?" Johnson demanded. "Why are you going to knock down the Manor? When you going to start?"

The others looked at him as if he were crazy. Then Mrs. Blandish said, "What do you know about the Manor, sir? Thought you said you was a stranger here and came from down south?"

"So I do, my good woman," Johnson snapped. "I don't like to hear of these fine old houses being destroyed. It's all wrong. I'm interested in old places and I'd like to see this Manor of yours... When are you going to start work on it?" he added to the thin, dark man who was looking at him curiously.

"Soon as we can, guv'nor. Going up now to have a look round and build our hut. We got to have headquarters, you know. This job is going to take a while but we got a lot of gear in the lorry and we'll make a start in a day or two... How do we get there, mate?" he asked Blandish. "How far?"

"About two miles. The old Manor stands above the gorge. Turn right at the bottom of this street..." The three men finished their drinks, nodded to Mrs. Blandish and followed him out into the sunshine.

As soon as they had gone, Johnson sat down heavily on the nearest chair and ran his fingers through his white hair. He looked suddenly tired and old. Mrs. Blandish looked down at him without pity, and when she saw the long white scar on the back of his hand she seemed to make up her mind. As her husband came back into the bar and the lorry started up, she said,

"Very well, Mr. Johnson. If you'll put up with it being rough here and take things as they come for us, and not expect anything fancy, then I reckon you can come for a week and see how we get on."

Johnson looked up and nodded.

"Good enough. We'll get on well enough if you leave me in peace. I don't like chatter and questions. Quiet is what I came for and what I'm paying for.

I like this country and I'll be taking a first look round this afternoon. I'll be glad to see my room now."

Mr. Blandish opened his mouth to speak but his wife checked him with a quick glance.

"Of course you shall see your room, sir, and I'll get a bit o' dinner ready while you're upstairs. We'll be glad to tell you how to get about the country if you're a stranger here. You've only to ask. Was there anything special you wanted to know about the Manor that's going to be knocked down? You seemed quite upset to hear about it."

"Of course I wasn't upset, Mrs. Blandish. Nonsense! It so happens that I'm very interested in old houses - big houses, I mean. It's a business matter. Sometimes as I go round the country and see one of these awkward old places that's up for sale, I can find a purchaser... There's people today will buy these old houses and use them for business. And I don't like questions, Mrs. Blandish... All the same, you can tell me about this Manor of yours. How long has it been sold? Who did it belong to?"

Mrs. Blandish nodded to her husband, who took up the tale.

"It's like this," he began as he absentmindedly wiped a glass. "The manor has been built about a hundred years or more. Some say it's ugly and maybe they're right, for it's all of red brick and got a sort of sham tower at one end. It's big - twenty bedrooms maybe, big kitchens and the like and fine gardens stuck up there on top of the cliffs above the gorge. The army was there in the war and a fine old mess they made of it. When Mrs. Whiteflower came back it was never the same."

"Why wasn't it the same?" Johnson broke in. "Who sold it now? This Mrs. Whiteflower? Who's she?"

"She's dead. Couple of months ago. She was just about the last of that lot. Her husband, the general, died a long time ago. Her only boy is about twelve and there's an aunt - sister of the general - looking after him. There's always been a general in the family. Anyway, the place is sold and no doubt they'll make good use of the money if there's enough left after everybody

has been paid off, though it's said there won't be a penny over for the last of the family... People shouldn't live in places they can't afford, should they, Maggie?"

Mrs. Blandish forced a smile. She never had thought that her husband had a sense of humour and now she was sure. She looked shrewdly at Johnson when he glanced up and asked, "That boy? Is he the last of the Whiteflowers?"

"So they say. His aunt looks after him now. They've cleared off anyway and gone to live somewhere Shropshire way. Don't want people here to know how poor they are."

"And the house? It takes a long time to knock down a house, doesn't it? They haven't started it yet, have they? What did those men say? Start in a few days, I thought they said."

"You'd better go up and see it for yourself," Mrs. Blandish suggested. "It's been empty for a while and if they're going to knock it down that foreman would have a key, but come to think of it I reckon a key is no use in an empty house that's going to be smashed up... Now I'll show you your room, sir."

As soon as he was alone, Blandish sat down in the chair just left by Johnson, brought out the £10 note from his pocket and examined it carefully. He was still staring at it when his wife came back and closed the door.

"Well?" he said. "Who is he? What's he after? Is Johnson his real name? What's he want to come here for? I don't like it, Maggie. There's something queer about him."

She snatched the money from his grubby fingers.

"How do I know? His money is good, isn't it? He's bulging with it and we may as well have some of it. You should know better than most how we need money, but what he's after I can't be sure. It's something to do with the Manor. I was watching him when that chap said they were going to knock it

down and I tell you, Simon Blandish, that as soon as he heard that he looked real bad... Shocked... That's it. Real surprised and shocked. What's the matter with you?"

Blandish stood up and stated over his wife's head.

"Wait. Wait," he said hoarsely. "I'm beginning to remember. The scar on his hand. That's what's been nagging at me ever since I seen it. The scar! Maybe you wouldn't remember it but I do. I've got it, Maggie! His name isn't Johnson. He's Harry Sentence, the butler at the Manor over forty years ago when the diamond necklace was stolen."

"The necklace that was never found? The one they believe was stolen by the housekeeper who was drowned?"

"That's it, Maggie. You weren't there then, but I was. Just a kid in the gardens. Didn't even know you then. Sentence was away at the time but he was thick with the young housekeeper and there's many thought he had something to do with it. The police could get nothing on to him but there was plenty of talk. He went to Australia or somewhere soon afterwards... There's another thing been puzzling me, Maggie. I remember that scar now. Only saw him once or twice but everyone at the Manor knew about it. The other thing is the way he talks. Sort of twang. Australian, that is... What's he come back here for, Maggie?"

She was about to answer him when a slight noise in the passage outside made her pause. Quickly she moved to the door and opened it.

Into the room fell the man calling himself William Johnson, who had been listening at the keyhole.

Blandish laughed. A horrid, almost silent laugh, as he stepped over the sprawling man on the floor, locked the door and pocketed the key.

"Get up" he ordered. "And don't waste your breath arguing. We know who you are. You're Harry Sentence from Australia and a long time ago you were butler up at the Manor where something real nasty happened. You've

given us false information, Mr. Sentence. Said your name was Johnson-----
"

The man stood up. He was pale, and shaking with anger. He swore and blustered. He told them that his name was no concern of theirs, that he'd never been a butler and never seen Bringewood Manor and that as he didn't like their attitude he was going to pack up and leave at once.

When he paused for breath, Mrs. Blandish said, "What my husband says is right and you know it. He recognized the scar on your hand and you speak like an Australian. You were spying on us, too. Listening at the keyhole. Why have you come back to Bringewood Chase? You're after something and we want to know what."

Simon Blandish nodded approval. "No use arguing. You're wasting your breath, mate. I *knows* you were butler up at the Manor. I was only a gardener's boy then but I remember you and that scar on your hand. I been puzzling about you ever since you walked in here. It's a long time and you wouldn't remember me, anyway. You are interested in that young woman who was housekeeper and I'll mind her name soon. Poor girl! Found drowned in the river she was, just when everyone was wondering whether the police thought she'd stolen the Whiteflower diamonds. You'd remember her, wouldn't you, Mr. Harry Sentence-----"

Sentence lunged forward as if to strike his tormentor but Blandish was bigger, stronger and younger and with a rough hand on his shoulder he forced him down into a chair.

"Sit there and listen to me, mate. It's all coming back to me now and if you can't remember I'll tell you. It would be better if us three understood each other, because the police might like to know that Harry Sentence has come home again. That necklace has never been found... Now listen to what I remember and don't interrupt until I've finished. What you've got to tell us is why you've come back and why you're so fussed and bothered about the old place being knocked down."

Blandish walked up and down waving his plump and grubby hands as he talked.

"You listen, mate, and don't interrupt. We'll argue when I've finished, and don't try and run off because the door's locked and it's past closing time, anyway. Forty-odd years ago it was. That was when all this began. The summer, and I'd just started as a kid in the gardens. You were a big man in the Manor in those days. Butler's job was a good one, but you was too big for your boots, I've heard it said. Wouldn't have noticed the gardener's boy even if he'd banged into you. I did once, though, and you cursed me right and proper and hit me, too. I remember the scar. Anyway, us outside staff got all our news from the kitchen and I know there was a lot o' talk about Mr. Sentence and the housekeeper. Nice, she was, and we all liked her. Good looking, too. Remember her name, mate?... Don't bother. I've got it. Harriet Brown. That was the name I've been trying to remember. My father was in charge of the gardens and he told me all this. It was the talk of the place that Miss Brown and Mr. Sentence were very good pals...

"Anyway, there's more to my story than that, Harry. Much more. One day in the summer when the Manor was full of guests and there was a ball, the Whiteflower diamond necklace was stolen from my lady's room. You were away for a day or two, my governor told me. Gone to a funeral or something... No. Don't get up, Sentence. I only want to help you remember... Anyway, the police came down and nosed around and all the servants were asked a lot of saucy questions. I remember a chap with a big, black moustache asking me all sorts of things. Anyway, the general didn't like his guests being mixed up in that sort of thing. Wouldn't have them questioned, I was told, but before the police went away poor Miss Brown was drowned in the river. It was the night of a very big storm and they could never find out where she fell in or when she left the Manor or where she was going. The river was high and I heard she was found below the bridge. Nobody knew why she'd left the house on a night like that. They still talk about the storm in the village here and how that poor young woman lost her life that night.

"When you came back again you must have felt very bad about Miss Brown. So upset that soon after you left and went to Australia. That's fair enough, isn't it? Fair enough story, I mean... *Why have you come back to Bringewood, Harry?* P'raps we can help you some way? We've been hoping that somebody who we could help would soon come along because things

aren't going too well for us here in this dead-and-alive hole. *Why did you come here and why have you come back to Bringewood, Harry? Where have you come from? Did you know the Manor had to be sold?*"

Sentence didn't put up much of a struggle - there didn't seem much he could do. He saw no reason why these two shouldn't help him. It might save him a lot of trouble, and if he was successful, no doubt there would be a way of outwitting them. He certainly didn't want the police to know that he was back in England.

"Very well," he admitted. "The luck's against me. I'm Harry Sentence and it's as you say. By the look of this place you're both in plenty of trouble. Suppose we help each other? Maybe I'm getting too old to do a job like this on my own. What do you say?"

"You've told us nothing yet," Mrs. Blandish said sharply. "What about this woman, Harriet Brown? The woman who was drowned?"

"That was an accident. I wasn't there. I was in Birmingham. My old father was ill. I knew nothing about it. I was fond of Harriet. I suppose everyone knew that."

"They did," Simon Blandish said grimly. "The police thought she stole the necklace, but couldn't prove it. Did she? Did she steal it for *you*, Harry?"

The two men stared at each other. The muscle in Blandish's face twitched as he waited for the important answer. Then Sentence turned away and sat down heavily. He was beaten.

"Yes, she did. We both hated the Manor and wanted to get married and start afresh in Australia. I reckon she stole it and hid it. It's never been found and I believe it's waiting somewhere to be picked up. I read in an English paper in Australia that the Whiteflower estate was to be sold after the death of Mrs. Whiteflower. There's a fortune waiting for whoever can find the Whiteflower diamonds. I've always been sure that Harriet hid them somewhere in the house while she was waiting for me to come back. It's certain sure she had an accident that night in the storm, else she would have written to me. She trusted me."

"Which is more than I would have done," Maggie Blandish said grimly. "It's my belief you persuaded her to take the risks and then bolted off to Birmingham on some excuse while she had to face the police and everything else. Poor woman... No use getting angry, Harry Sentence. You'll be wasting your breath. Where do you think she hid it?"

"First place to search is her room. Chimney, maybe, or under the floor, but we'll have to get to work before the housebreakers. Is the house empty now? What happened to the furniture? You two have got to help me. We'll go after this right away. Now. Sooner the better. We'll take a third each and that's fair enough, isn't it?"

Blandish walked over to the door and unlocked it. "We'll decide what's fair when we've found the diamonds," he said in his soft voice. "We're looking after you from now on, Harry. One of us will be with you all the time and we're very, very glad you came to stay with us, aren't we, Maggie?"

She laughed unpleasantly. "All for £15 a week, too, and cash in advance. No wonder you wanted peace and quiet and no questions, Harry... Listen! I've just thought of something. In the local paper there's a notice of a sale of old furniture in Ludlow. Today or tomorrow, it said. The advert said that some of the furniture comes from the Manor. If any of it belonged to the housekeeper's room it would be worth looking at maybe. Things can be hid in furniture."

Sentence was shaking with excitement.

"Fetch the paper, Maggie. Let's see it quick. I must go to that sale."

"If you go, I go with you, mate," Blandish said softly. "Harry doesn't go anywhere by himself from now on."

2. The Hidden Clue

About twenty miles to the north-west of Bringewood Chase on the borders of Shropshire and Wales is the village of Barton Beach. It lies in the shadow of the Stiperstones - a gaunt mountain range crowned with the quartzite rocks of the Devil's Chair.

Barton was looking its rather shabby best on the same morning that Harry Sentence arrived in Bringewood Chase. There was nothing picturesque about Barton's only street. There was a gloomy little church, an inn and one shop over which lived a fifteen-year-old girl called Jenny Harman. Her father owned the shop, which was also the post office. He was small and rather vague and untidy, with a big black moustache which was his most impressive feature. Mr. Harman's shop sold almost everything. The door was up two steps and was fitted with an old bell on a spring that jangled a warning when a customer arrived. There was a stale-smelling telephone box at the back of the shop, a small counter behind a metal grille where post office business was conducted, and other counters piled with weekly papers, sweets, cigarettes and packeted food.

On this August morning when the adventure really began, Jenny was alone in the shop. Her father was busy upstairs doing what he called his accounts while her stepmother was washing up the breakfast things.

Jenny was a red-head and wore her rather unruly hair in a pony-tail. She was small and neat with grey eyes and an eager little face. The shop was fun to her, and because she was incurably romantic she was always hoping that something exciting and thrilling was about to happen to her. Jenny was often lonely because there were very few boys and girls of her own age in Barton, and so she escaped into the make-believe world of the romantic stories of the popular weekly papers.

From the counter she picked up the latest issue of the newest and most sensational of the women's weeklies, but perhaps because it was such a beautiful morning and possibly because the summer holidays were only a few days old, Jenny soon got bored with it and began to think of her friend

Tom Ingles. Tom worked on his uncle's farm some miles away on the other side of a mountain called the Long Mynd. He was sixteen and came from London, and he was the best friend Jenny had ever had. Tom was nearly always busy but they met sometimes in the holidays and Jenny was always welcome at Ingles Farm, where they made a great fuss of her. Tom, of course, was a member of the Lone Pine Club, but he didn't take it as seriously as Jenny, who often said that the club was the most wonderful thing in her life.

Jenny pushed the paper aside, sat on the stool behind the counter and supported her chin on her clasped hands. Tom might have written to her. He might have telephoned her, too. Then there were the other members of the club. Peter, a year older than Jenny, whose real name was Petronella Sterling and who went to boarding school near Shrewsbury, had written to her once during the term. Next to Tom, Peter was certainly Jenny's best friend. Then there were the three Mortons, David who was sixteen, and the twins, Dickie and Mary, who lived in London; their father owned the old farmhouse called Witchend near Ingles. Peter and David had started the Lone Pine Club, and it was certain that the Mortons would be coming to Witchend for some part of the long holiday.

Jenny hoped they would come soon. She hoped something exciting and unexpected would happen to her this very morning. It would be fun if the Lone Piners could go over to Seven Gates again and meet in the old barn with the white doors which was the second headquarters of the club. Seven Gates was a farm belonging to Peter's uncle, Micah Sterling, and was up beyond a pine wood about a mile from Barton Beach. The Lone Piners were always welcome to camp in Uncle Micah's big bam.

There were so many exciting things that might happen, and Jenny was still dreaming about them when the first unexpected thing happened. She looked up to see a boy's face pressed against the window, staring at her through the glass. The face was crowned by a thatch of almost white hair, and although Jenny had seen the boy before the sudden shock of his unusual appearance and his odd behaviour made her jump. She was sure that there was a mystery about the boy, who had been seen about the village several times during the past few days. Her stepmother, who knew most things that

happened in Barton, had told her that the boy was living in rooms in the cottage of a widow named Mrs. Quickseed, half a mile out of the village. An elderly woman, who rarely came out, had been seen once with him.

The first time Jenny had noticed him in the street she had smiled at him because he looked lonely and unhappy. He had flushed and turned away. Jenny was convinced that there was a secret in his life, but could not make up her mind whether he was shy or stuck-up. She was always ready to make friends and because she was often lonely she was sorry for anybody who seemed lonely too. Anyway, it was silly to stare and then run away, and if there was a mystery about this boy she now determined to solve it.

She ran round the counter and flung open the shop door. The fair-haired boy was hurrying away, looking back over his shoulder, but just as Jenny had made up her mind to run after him, a Land-Rover came roaring down the street and stopped beside her. At first she could hardly believe her eyes and then the driver sounded his horn and Tom - actually Tom Ingles himself - jumped out.

Jenny felt her face crimson with excitement and her heart thumped so that she could hardly speak. It was really Tom laughing at her, his black hair all over the place as usual and his face browner than ever. Before he could speak, his uncle Alf Ingles jumped out of the driving seat and roared a welcome.

"HULLO, JEN, MY GIRL! COME HERE AND GIVE YOUR UNCLE ALF A KISS. TOM'S GOT A DAY OFF."

Jenny wasn't his girl, he wasn't her uncle and she hardly ever kissed anybody except her father, but she liked Mr. Ingles very much so she didn't protest when he lifted her up, squeezed the breath out of her and gave her a smacking kiss.

"CAN'T STOP," he shouted. "GOING TO BISHOP'S CASTLE MARKET. CALL FOR TOM TONIGHT. WAIT TILL I COME. CHEERIO," and his voice drowned the noise of the Land-Rover's engine as he roared away down the street again.

For a moment or two Tom and Jenny couldn't find anything to say. The fair-haired boy was completely forgotten, because if, ten minutes ago, Jenny had been granted three wishes, the first would have been that Tom, or one of her other friends, would suddenly arrive and take her away for the day. And now the wish had been granted. Jenny sighed rapturously, looked at Tom and giggled.

"Oh, Tom. This is the most wonderful thing that has ever happened to me. There I was, standing right on the step there after being haunted - absolutely haunted, Tom - by a boy who looks like a ghost, and hoping that something terrific would happen and there you were. Like that story in the Bible when some old man - I forget who - was whisked away in a fiery chariot, only you arrived in one, if you know what I mean."

Tom blinked. Jenny was off again!

"Don't know what you're talking about, Jenny. Ingles' harvest isn't ready for cutting yet and Uncle wanted to go to market to see somebody at Bishop's Castle, so here I am."

"Come in, Tom. I'm in charge of the shop. You come and help me. I'll tell you about this new boy here and how he haunts me. What about the others, Tom? Is Peter home? Are the Mortons coming to Witchend? What are the Lone Piners going to do this holiday?"

"Don't know much except that Peter is back at Hatchholt and the others on the way to Witchend. David had written to Peter, but I don't know when they'll be here... Just when we start the harvest, I s'pose. Just my luck. Ought I to go up and say "How do?" to your Dad and Mum, Jen?"

"Not yet, Tom. I must tell you about this white-haired boy who haunts me, and then we'll go and ask if we can go out for the day. P'raps we could go up to the Devil's Chair."

She went on to tell him about the mysterious boy, but try as she would she realized by Tom's face as he listened to her that there wasn't really much to tell.

"I know he's lonely and unhappy, Tom. I think we ought to find out more about him and p'raps offer to help him. We could go to Mrs. Quickseed's cottage on the way up the mountain and spy on him. I'm sure he wants to be helped, Tom. He's just afraid to ask me for help. He's getting up his courage, Tom. If you're with me he won't run away the next time."

Tom laughed. "He'll run faster, Jen. Sure you haven't made most of this up? Sounds like one of your stories..."

The shop bell clanged and a man came in with a big bundle of newspapers on his shoulder. He slipped it to the floor, winked at Jenny, said, "Sign here, miss. Thanks very much. Cheerio."

"Stay here, Tom. I must fetch Dad. This is the local paper. Comes from Shrewsbury. Lots of people will be in for the *Standard*. If you've got a knife you can cut the string round the bundle."

Tom did as he was told and was looking to see if anything worth while was on at the pictures when Mr. Harman came down.

"Morning, Tom. Pleasant surprise. Always welcome here. Sorry not to see your uncle. Was thinking of going in to Ludlow presently. Let's look at the paper. Someone told me there's going to be a second-hand furniture sale in Ludlow today. I've been looking for a good sofa and chairs to match for quite a bit. Promised Mum I'd find her something... Ah! Here's the advert... This afternoon at two-thirty precisely, it says. Some of the furniture comes from Bringewood Manor. That'll be the sort of stuff I'll want. We've got no time for this new spiky, spindly stuff they call furniture... You two better come with me. We'll tell Mum she's got a surprise coming if she'll stay here. Let's ask her."

On the way upstairs Jenny whispered to Tom, "Do you mind coming to Ludlow? P'raps we ought to go. Dad does like to have somebody with him on a jaunt like this. We could go to the castle, Tom?"

Tom didn't mind. He was always fascinated by Mr. Harman's car, which was the most remarkable vehicle in which he had ever travelled. Certainly it

was the oldest and the noisiest, and Tom was sure that Mr. Harman was the worst driver in Shropshire.

Fifteen minutes later the expedition was on its way with Mr. Harman triumphantly at the wheel. The ancient car, which he had painted bright blue, started off with a terrifying jerk and a series of shattering reports. Tom, rather un-gallantly, insisted on sitting next to the driver, while Jenny bounced about alone on the rear seat. All went well until they met a herd of cows on the corner of the road to Bishop's Castle. When he noticed them Mr. Harman seemed to press the accelerator instead of the foot brake. Tom closed his eyes and held on to the edge of his seat as Boy Blue (as Jenny called it) swerved on to the grass verge, swayed and rocked dangerously as cows plunged hysterically all round it, and then regained the road followed by the curses of the two drovers.

"Silly things!" Jenny said complacently as her father continued his conversation as if nothing had happened.

And so they came at last to Ludlow, which some say is the fairest country town in England. In the twelfth century its walls were pierced with seven gates of which only one now remains, but everything else about it today is overshadowed by its magnificent castle, a memorial to the days when its courtyards echoed to the ring of steel and armoured knights rode over the drawbridge to fight the marauding Welsh.

Below the castle walls, at the foot of the cliffs, the lovely River Teme half circles the town before tumbling under two bridges on its way to add its clear waters to those of the muddy Severn.

Boy Blue toiled up the long hill to the town. The policeman on point duty at the top heard them coming - indeed, he could not fail to do so - and hastily gave them a free passage. They were lucky to find space in a car park and then Mr. Harman asked them what they would like to do.

"We'd like to picnic in the castle, please, Dad. Tom has never been inside. May we meet you somewhere presently?"

This suited Mr. Harman very well. He wanted to find the auction rooms and certainly did not mind an hour or so of his own company, so he gave them five shillings and said he would meet them at the castle entrance at two o'clock.

Jenny was now supremely happy. She loved towns and the bustle in the streets and the friendly people. It was wonderful to be with Tom, even although he was pretending to be rather grown-up as she chattered away and stopped to look in nearly every shop window. They bought rolls and butter and corned beef and cheese and apples and took them to the castle. Jenny, who had been here before, made him climb the worn stone steps to the top of the mighty keep, from where they had a view that even silenced her for a long minute. To the north they could see through the heat haze the bulk of the Long Mynd and the Stretton Hills; to the north-east was the wooded escarpment of Wenlock Edge, and as they turned towards the south the massive Clees dominated the skyline. To the west were the misty hills of Wales and below them the Teme sparkled in the sun.

Then they sat down on the warm stones and leaned against the wall and shared their picnic. For the first time since he had known her, Tom told Jenny of his memories of London and of his parents, who had both been killed in an air-raid. Jenny didn't say much, but they were both surprised when they heard the clock in the great tower of the church of St. Lawrence strike twice.

Mr. Harman was in excellent spirits. He had found the auction rooms, bought a sale catalogue and inspected some furniture which had come from Bringewood Manor.

"A sofa and two chairs to match, Jen. Very good taste, my dear, I assure you. Your Mum will like them. They are old-fashioned and so should be cheap enough. To be sold in two lots, it says in the catalogue; the sofa first."

The sale rooms were in a narrow side street. When he led them in there were already thirty or forty people waiting for the auctioneer. The atmosphere was stuffy, dusty and thick with tobacco smoke and the hall itself crammed with furniture and second-hand household goods. At the far

end, under a dim electric bulb, was a wooden desk, and to this after a few minutes came the auctioneer.

Mr. Harman managed to squeeze into the front row of the waiting people and Jenny whispered, "I don't think this is fun, Tom. Shall we escape? I can't see properly."

But Tom wanted to see how a sale worked, so he grabbed her arm and guided her to the side of the hall, where they managed to sit on the edge of a kitchen table. The sale began. The auctioneer, in a monotonous sing-song voice, did all he could to raise the bidding and banged with a little hammer on his desk when the highest bid was reached. Two men in aprons moved the furniture and the purchasers went up to a clerk at another desk to pay.

People went out and more crowded in. The room got hotter and hotter and Jenny more and more bored.

At last the auctioneer announced the furniture from Bringewood Manor, but anybody could see that what was offered was not of much value and few people seemed interested. Mr. Harman turned round, smiled at Jenny and Tom, pointed to a hideous sofa with a curved back and shiny, black upholstery. Jenny knew very well how excited her father was at the idea of getting something cheap like this, but she couldn't help hoping that she would never have to sit on it. It looked cold even in this hot weather! She was about to tell Tom what she thought when she had the curious feeling that somebody was watching her. She turned quickly and, to her astonishment, saw the fair-haired boy from Barton staring at them. He flushed and whispered something to a tall, grey-haired woman in tweeds. She looked kind but worried and unhappy, though when Jenny caught her eye she gave her a quick smile.

Then the auctioneer started the bidding and Mr. Harman offered ten shillings.

"Come, come, ladies and gentlemen," wheedled the auctioneer. "Only ten shillings for this perfect example of Victorian craftsmanship? Please let us get down to real business... Any advance on ten shillings?"

"One pound," said a deep, pleasant voice from the back of the room and everyone - but none more quickly than Mr. Harman - turned round to see who wanted the Victorian craftsmanship. It was the woman in tweeds, who remained composed when Mr. Harman bid twenty-five shillings and bid thirty herself.

"Oh, Tom," Jenny whispered. "He's getting excited. He'll do something silly, I'm sure... See that fair boy? He's the one from home who haunts me. He is, Tom. He's with the woman who wants Dad's sofa, only I can't think why."

Amidst some laughs and a buzz of conversation Mr. Harman got his sofa for five pounds. While he was paying the clerk there was a commotion at the door and two men forced their way into the room. One was fat and pale and shabbily dressed and the other, who looked very hot and angry, was wearing brown tweeds and steel-rimmed spectacles. They mopped their faces as they edged their way to the side of the room near Tom and Jenny. Several people grumbled at them and then Tom distinctly heard the man in the tweed suit say, "See that black sofa, Simon? That piece of rubbish over there on the left? That was hers. I remember it in her room. No sense in buying it, I suppose?"

The other lowered his voice, but Jenny, responding to Tom's nudge, heard his reply.

"Why not? Doesn't look as if anything could be hidden there, but-----" then, as he realized that he was overheard he glared at Tom and Jenny and whispered to his companion.

Then the auctioneer offered the pair of matching chairs and Sentence asked for the sofa to be included so that he could buy the set. When told that the sofa had already been sold he muttered and fumed and then bid ten pounds for the chairs. Mr. Harman certainly did not intend to compete with such a ridiculous offer, and the woman with the boy shrugged her shoulders, whispered to him and then the two of them hurried out.

"I'm sorry for her," the plump woman said to her neighbour. "'Tis going to be hard for her and the boy. Reckon she must have wanted that ugly stuff

because it came from the Manor. I heard tell they're living in rooms up Stiperstones way."

Mr. Harman, who had persuaded two of the auctioneer's men to carry the sofa outside, was making frantic signs to Tom and Jenny to follow him. Jenny slid off the table and then said impetuously to the woman, "Please tell me that fair boy's name? I heard what you said, and he's come to live just outside my village, but he isn't very friendly."

The woman smiled.

"Fancy that now! He's Nicholas Whiteflower and the lady is his aunt. She's all he's got now for his mother died but a month or more ago and he'll hardly remember his father. Whiteflowers have lived hundred years or more in the big house not so far away called Bringewood Manor. There was terrible debts, they say, and now all is sold up and the Manor is to be knocked down and it's a wicked world when that can happen... That gentleman with the big moustache and the sofa seems to be in trouble."

"He's my dad," Jenny laughed. "We're going to help him. Good-bye!"

The sofa looked more uncomfortable than ever on the sunny pavement, but Mr. Harman was delighted with it and himself.

"Just sit on it and look after it while I fetch the car," he said, and then to the two men in a burst of generosity, "And there's five bob for you two if you'll wait and help me fix it on the back."

The men nodded and lit cigarettes. Tom went off with Mr. Harman to help him out of the car park and Jenny sat down between the two men on the sofa. As she had guessed it was very uncomfortable. She was getting on well with her new companions when Sentence and Blandish came out.

"Where's the man who bought that?" the latter snapped. "We want to buy it from him."

"Well, you can't-----" Jenny began indignantly, and then Boy Blue with a roar and a rattle and in a cloud of blue smoke came round the corner, and

further conversation was impossible until Mr. Harman switched off the engine. As he got out Sentence said,

"Don't want to waste your time but I'll give you £20 for that sofa. Want it to match the two chairs I bought just now."

Mr. Harman's magnificent moustache trembled with surprise. £15 profit in a few minutes did not often come his way! Jenny knew exactly what he was thinking and suddenly she was furious with the two bullying men. The one in the brown suit was actually taking notes from his wallet when she clutched her father's arm.

"Don't sell it, Dad. You promised Mum you would bring her something and she'll be upset if you don't. You know she'll love it."

"So she will, Jen. So she will. It's just what she likes. Handsome and solid. Looks good. Got tone, too! You're right, Jen. I didn't come here to make a profit but to buy Mum a present... Sorry, mister. I'm not selling. Not for any money."



"Sorry, mister. I'm not selling. Not for any money."

Sentence argued while Mr. Harman pulled down the door of the old-fashioned boot in Boy Blue and asked the two men to tie the sofa to it. Then Blandish began to bluster and finally Mr. Harman lost his temper and told them to go away and stay away. He also refused to tell them who he was and where he lived in case he changed his mind, and by the time the sofa was fixed to the back of the car the two confederates, muttering and cursing, had gone back into the sale room.

The knowledge that the sofa on the back of the car was really worth so much more than he had paid for it elated Mr. Harman tremendously, so that even Jenny begged him to drive more carefully. Tom was so scared that he paid little attention when Jenny told her father about Nicholas Whiteflower.

"He ought to be living in the Manor, Dad, but he's so poor now that he has to live with that old Quickseed witch. Really the sofa and the chairs belong to them, if you know what I mean. Dad? It seems awful for us to have what they wanted. P'raps they haven't even got anything to sit on at Quickseed's? If Mum absolutely loathes the sofa, shall we give it to that sad boy Nicholas?"

"Certainly not," Mr. Harman said firmly, taking his eye off the road for a nearly disastrous moment. "I shall sell it to those two ruffians who offered £20 for it if I can find them."

"But, Dad, don't you see that the Whiteflowers came all the way to the sale today just to try and buy something from their old home. Can't you see how *sad* it is?"

Neither her father nor Tom seemed to mind whether Nicholas was sad or not. Tom, in fact, was quite outspoken.

"Stop fussing about him, Jen. Thought he looked a poor sort of type myself... Stuck-up, too... Just look out of the back window and see if the sofa is still there."

They reached home safely and Tom sighed with relief as they untied the sofa and lowered it carefully to the pavement.

Much to everybody's surprise Mrs. Harman approved. She was not enthusiastic and she did not ask if there were any chairs to match, but she did thank her husband and say that it would look all the better for a good clean. Mr. Harman and Tom then carried it round to a shed in the yard behind the shop, and Jenny suggested that they should clean and polish it before taking it upstairs. Rather to her surprise Tom said he would help her, so Mr. Harman relieved his wife in the shop so that she could rest upstairs.

"Sure you don't mind, Tom?" Jenny said as she set to work with furniture polish. "I thought if I offered it would cheer up Mum as she's been alone all day."

"Course I don't mind. I've got an idea. Remember what one of those toughs said when they first came into the sale? When they were standing near us and didn't know your Dad had bought the sofa."

"No, Tom. What?"

"Something about remembering it in *her* room, and the other said that it didn't look as if anything could be hidden in it... There's a space between the cushion part and the back and under these arms, too. Your hands are smaller than mine, Jen. See what you can find."

Jenny saw what he meant. It was possible to get her hand between the back and the black shiny upholstery, but why should a stranger suggest that something might be hidden there?

She dropped her duster and pushed her hand down the crack. It felt horrid, but as she moved it along rather painfully she was rewarded. She found three Victorian pennies, four blue glass buttons, some cherry stones and a metal shoe buckle.

"It's only rubbish, Tom," she laughed when she was half way round. "Did you think we'd find a treasure?"

"Didn't know what we'd find, Jenny. This old sofa was a trap for all sorts of things. Try again."

She pushed her hand down again.

"Oh, Tom! Here's some paper. P'raps it's a love letter?"

She pulled out a packet of yellowing paper and Tom came round and looked over her shoulder as she unfolded the first sheet which was covered with spidery handwriting.

"It isn't a love letter, Tom, but it's part of a letter. It says, '*I have done what you asked and now you have failed me*'."

3. The Letter

On the morning after the furniture sale in Ludlow, Miss Whiteflower and Nicholas were together in the sitting-room of Mrs. Quickseed's house on the road beyond Barton Beach. They had only three rooms and had come here because Miss Whiteflower could not bear to stay in or near Bringewood Chase, where they were known. Neither was Barton too far from Ludlow and Shrewsbury, where they had some friends, and further, Mrs. Quickseed was the only one to answer their advertisement for cheap accommodation.

The widow may have had a bad reputation in the village, but she was harmless enough when the Whiteflowers got to know her. She was a good cook, the house was clean, and she didn't talk much except to her cats. She had nine cats and they were all as silly about her as she was about them. They followed her into the garden and up the road and they spat at Nicholas, who loathed them.

It was little wonder that the boy was miserable and had taken a particular dislike to his temporary home in Barton Beach. It was difficult for him to understand why his own home had been sold and now was to be broken up, and he was still feeling lonely and unhappy without his mother. He liked his Aunt Margaret well enough; she was kind even if she was strict and he respected her for that. The trouble was that she didn't seem to understand that her company was not enough and that he wanted boys and girls of his own age. He had been taken away from his school on the south coast just before his mother died and had not gone back for the last few weeks of term. Now there was some sort of mystery about going back at the end of the summer holidays.

Miss Whiteflower was sitting in one of Mrs. Quickseed's hard chairs, knitting. Nicholas was staring rebelliously out of the window. He had been driven indoors by a sharp but heavy thunderstorm that was still growling and rumbling round the Devil's Chair towering above the village. His clothes were wet and his fair hair was plastered across his forehead.

"I can't take you upstairs and undress you, Nicholas. That would be too undignified. Surely you know by now that it is at least sensible to change out of wet clothes. And if you were in the village, why hadn't you the sense to shelter there instead of running back here in the storm?"

"It's much too hot for me to catch cold. The sun will be out in a minute and then my shirt can dry on me. I wish you'd stop fussing me. Aunt Margaret. I'm not a baby... And I didn't shelter in the village because I hate the village and everybody in it, I wouldn't even walk down the street if there was anywhere else to go. There isn't. You couldn't have found a more hideous, ghastly, lonely place to live in if you'd tried for a hundred years."

Miss Whiteflower put down her knitting.

"We're both feeling hurt and we're both lonely, Nicholas. There's no real reason why we should be rude to each other, is there?"

He turned from the window, hoping that she wouldn't see the tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I know this was all we could find but I didn't realize it would be so awful. There's nobody to talk to or to do anything with and this place is so small there's no room to move. Every time I open a door I fall over a cat. I can hear one yowling outside now... All the same, I'm sorry I was rude, and don't worry about my shirt. I shall be all right... If only I could think of something to do, or find somebody to talk to."

"There must be somebody of your age in the village, Nicholas. If you weren't so shy you'd find life easier. What about that jolly red-headed girl and the brown-faced boy who was with her at the sale yesterday? I thought she looked charming and full of fun. Where did you say she lived?"

Nicholas flushed. "I told you. She lives at the shop and it was her father Mr. Harman who bought the sofa yesterday. The one from the housekeeper's room we thought we were going to get cheap. I don't know who the boy is but they're both older than I am."

"Well, the girl may be older but she's not much bigger and I liked the look of her. As she lives here she ought to be able to show you round. And how do you know that she isn't lonely too? I shall make some enquiries and we can ask her up here. Have you seen the boy before, Nicholas?"

"No, I haven't, and you mustn't do anything like that, Aunt Margaret. Please don't ask that girl up here. I'm sure she's nosy. I know she keeps on trying to find out things about us. Please leave me alone, but do please let us go away from here as soon as we can... And I wish we'd never gone to that stupid sale yesterday."

Nicholas turned again to the window and opened it. The rain had stopped, the sun was out and the road was steaming. There was a wonderful smell of warm, wet earth and although thunder was still muttering in the distance, the most noticeable sound was that of water singing and gurgling in the gutters. There was a distant sound of voices, too, which was unusual on this little-used road; but Nicholas was thinking of something else.

"We didn't say much about it yesterday, Aunt Margaret," he said suddenly. "But who do you think those two men were? The two men who bought the two chairs and wanted the sofa, too? They came in late, you remember, and pushed everybody about. Why did they want our old stuff so badly?"

"I never thought about it much, Nicholas. They were certainly most rude and unpleasant and I have never seen them before. I suppose they thought our things were cheap - but they bid a lot for the chairs, didn't they? Oh dear! It doesn't really matter, does it? I want to forget all about the sale, Nicky."

Nicholas turned again to the open window, gasped with surprise and then drew back into the room.

"It's two girls - one of them is the red-headed one from the shop - and the boy who was with her yesterday. What do they want here?"

Miss Whiteflower put her knitting on the table and smiled. "Come to call on us, perhaps, Nicky? I wanted to meet the redhead, didn't I? Listen."

Through the open window they heard a girl's pleasant voice say, "You'd better ask for them, Jenny. Ask for the boy first. This is all your adventure, really. Have you still got it safe?"

"Of course I have. All right, I'll knock. Did I tell you that for absolutely years I thought Mrs. Quickseed was a witch? I did, honestly. P'raps she still is? She's got hundreds of cats here. You'll see them as soon as the door opens and I bet she's got a shed full of broomsticks. I wouldn't have come here in the dark, or without you two. I think it's most peculiar that this haunting boy and his aunt have come here to live, but I s'pose they don't think so. Do you think we ought to tell them-----"

Then came a firm, double knock on the door and then Jenny's unmistakable squeak of protest. "Oh, Tom! Why did you do that? I was going to knock but you keep on interrupting me."

They heard a boy's laugh and then Mrs. Quickseed's footsteps in the passage outside. Then came Jenny's excited voice.

"Oh... Good morning, Mrs. Quickseed. Please we want to see Nicholas Whiteflower very, very urgently. It's difficult to explain but it's private and extremely, urgently, vitally important... If he's in *please* tell him, and if not I think we'd better speak to Miss Whiteflower, please."

Nicholas and his aunt looked at each other in astonishment. Then Miss Whiteflower went quickly to the door and opened it.

"Thank you, Mrs. Quickseed. Will you please ask our friends to come in. I was hoping they would call."

Nicholas, looking rather sulky, retreated to the window as his aunt welcomed them.

"You seem to know our names so perhaps you will tell me yours." She shook hands with Jenny first. "I saw you yesterday in Ludlow, my dear. What is your name?"

"I'm Jenny Harman. My dad keeps the shop and he bought your sofa at the sale yesterday. Of course we didn't know it was yours then, but a most terrific thing has happened and we thought that we must tell you-----"

"Thank you very much, Jenny. Tell us in a minute, if you please. Who is this?" and she turned to the fair girl standing just behind her. She looked a second time, for she realized that Jenny's friend was soon going to be a very beautiful young woman. She was the tallest of the three - slim and upright, with a clear, tanned skin and blue eyes. Her hair was fair and worn in coiled plaits and she had a poise, dignity and natural good manners rare in one so young.

"I'm Petronella Sterling, but everybody calls me Peter," she smiled. "I live with my father on the other side of the Long Mynd and my uncle has a farm called Seven Gates quite near here. Jenny and Tom are old friends... This is Tom Ingles who lives with his uncle close to me. Tom is a farmer."

"Going to be," Tom laughed. "Plenty of time yet. I'm on holiday today again. Jen's got a lot to tell you."

"Come and shake hands with your new friends, Nicholas," Miss Whiteflower said, and it was well that she didn't see the glance exchanged between the three. Nicholas did as he was told with a rather bad grace and then retired to the window again.

"I'm sorry we haven't enough chairs for you all," Miss Whiteflower said. "Shall we go out into the garden or walk up the road or would some of you prefer to sit on the floor? Will what you have to tell us take long, Jenny?"

"Yes, it might. It's very, very secret, though." She looked meaningfully towards the door. "If I speak quietly here, it really will be private, won't it? I think my vital news would be easier to say in here."

Jenny took a deep breath, looked to Tom for encouragement and began.

"It's like this, Miss Whiteflower. We saw you at the sale yesterday but it wasn't until after you'd gone that we knew who you were. I've seen Nicholas several times in the village but he always runs away. Anyway,

Tom came over yesterday and my dad wanted to buy some old furniture for home and saw the notice in the paper, so off we went. Dad said the sofa was exactly what he wanted so he bought it, but of course he didn't know that it was really yours, if you know what I mean..."

She paused for breath and Miss Whiteflower nodded sympathetically. She knew exactly what Jenny meant.

"Well," Jenny went on excitedly. "We were cleaning the sofa last night and there's quite a space between the leather seat and the back and the arms. Tom said all sorts of things might have slipped down and they had. I found lots of rubbish but I found some old papers, too. It's part of a letter and 'cos the sofa once belonged to the Whiteflower family we thought that, in a way, the letter might be a sort of Whiteflower letter. We think there's a mystery in it and what we would like to do more than anything else is to help you if we can."

Nicholas was still standing sulkily by the window. Nobody had taken any notice of him for five minutes and he was feeling angry and jealous. Before he could think of a rude or hurtful remark, Peter said, "*Please* don't think that we're not minding our own business, Miss Whiteflower... Oh dear. That isn't what I meant to say. We're not really minding our business, are we? We want you to understand that if we can help you in any way, we'd love to do so. We've got three more friends coming up here soon and we shall be camping in one of my uncle's barns, so we shall be very close to you. Actually we're quite good at helping people and solving mysteries. We've had a lot of adventures."

Miss Whiteflower looked startled.

"Thank you very much, Petronella," was all she could think of to say.

Then Tom, after a glance at Nicholas to whom he had already taken a dislike, spoke up.

"If you wouldn't think it rude, Miss, would you mind telling us whether there was any particular reason why you wanted that old sofa - except that it came from your Manor, I mean?"

Nicholas stepped forward.

"Why can't you all *shut up* about my home," he said shakily. "It isn't anything to do with anybody except my aunt and me. If you've got papers that belong to us why don't you hand them over and go."

A horrid silence followed this outburst. Nicholas turned his back to the room and Miss Whiteflower's voice shook as she said,

"You should be ashamed of yourself, Nicholas. I must apologize for him... I see no particular reason why I should answer Tom's question, but as the sofa now belongs to Mr. Harman, and as I appreciate your coming here today, I will tell you. I knew that some old furniture from the Manor would be offered at the sale, and I wanted some pieces cheap for the smaller home I hope to be able to make for Nicholas as soon as our affairs are settled. It would have been nice to have had at least something from his old home. The sofa and matching chairs were of little value. They once belonged to the housekeeper's sitting-room which has not been in use for many years... Is the letter you have found, Jenny, actually addressed to any member of the Whiteflower family?"

"No, it isn't. We don't know who it's meant for, but it was inside your sofa and we thought you and Nicholas ought to know about it... Would you like to read it yourself?" and she fumbled in the pocket of her jeans and produced the crumpled sheets of yellowing paper.

Miss Whiteflower shook her head.

"No, my dear. You read it to us. You found it and it was good of you to think of us... Come over here, Nicholas, and try and behave as befits your age... Now, Jenny."

Jenny, pink and a little breathless with excitement, unfolded the sheets of paper.

"There's no date or address and it's only part of a letter. We've searched everywhere else in the sofa but there's no more of it - only glass beads and

buttons and hairpins. We don't know what it really means except that it's very tragic and private-----"

"*Please* read it, Jen!" Tom pleaded. "Miss Whiteflower really wants to know what we found."

Jenny gulped, glared at them and began to read:

"I have done what you asked and now you have failed me. You have gone away. You promised to come here. I waited and waited but you did not come and now they say that you have gone away for a week. Why didn't you tell me that you were going? Were you afraid? I am afraid now. I have been questioned twice but my lady trusts me. I am afraid of the detective. I am afraid of his eyes. They say that the general will soon send him away because he wants no scandal with his guests, but I am sure the man watches me as if he knew I had them safe. They have searched our rooms...

..."That man has been here, to my room again. I only just had time to hide this paper. We are all to meet together in the hall tonight. I think it is a trick. I believe he will search this room when I leave it. If I knew where you were I would post them to you. If you had not promised to take me away from this place I would put it back in my lady's room again, but, oh, Harry, they are so beautiful. Like ice-cold fire. I have worn them twice. They are more beautiful on my neck than on hers... Now I am afraid again. It has rained all day. The storm is worse. I can hear the river roaring in the gorge.

"If only you were here I should not be afraid. I do not know where to leave the necklace now. Why did you go away? Where can I put it so that he will not find it? I dare not leave it here in the house. I shall go out now into the storm and put it where the water-----"

"That's all," Jenny finished. "The writing sort of trails off a bit at the bottom of the page as if she was interrupted or frightened. I think whoever wrote that letter must have been very frightened, don't you, Miss Whiteflower? Would you like to read it now?"

Miss Whiteflower took the old papers and read through them, with Nicholas looking over her shoulder. The others fidgeted about the little room uncomfortably. Tom had never wanted to come here. He had wanted to wait until the Mortons arrived so that they could all talk it over together, and he disliked Nicholas. Before he left Barton last night, Jenny had persuaded him to let Peter know all about their discovery and to bring her over first thing this morning. This he had done as his uncle had given him another day off, and as Peter was anxious to see Jenny anyway they had cycled over together.

Peter would also have liked to have waited for David, but Jenny was so excited about the discovery of the letter, and so upset by what had happened to the Whiteflowers, that she had agreed to come up to Quickseed's cottage almost as soon as she and Tom arrived.

Miss Whiteflower handed the papers back to Jenny.

"Thank you... I think we should all try to get to know each other better. What you have found in the old sofa from the housekeeper's room is, I believe, very, very important. My family has searched in vain for any message from the unfortunate woman who wrote this letter, for many, many years. If we could find the next sheet of the letter or indeed any other clue as to where she put the Whiteflower diamonds which she stole from her employer, we might well discover the necklace itself. Are you sure, Jenny, that there are no more papers in the old sofa? Would your father mind if we had a further search? Will you take me to your father, Jenny?"

Jenny nodded and Peter stepped forward impulsively.

"We'll all help you, Miss Whiteflower," she said. "Just trust us. I told you we've got more friends coming. They may even be in Shropshire this afternoon or tomorrow. Although we've never found diamonds before, I don't see why we shouldn't try. This is just exactly the sort of thing we've been waiting for, and you'll soon see how lucky you were when you came to Barton and when Jenny and Tom went to the sale in Ludlow. Please don't tell the police or any strange grown-ups about it all until we've given you our ideas, will you?"

Before Miss Whiteflower could answer, Jenny spoke up.

"We don't know much about diamonds, but I suppose it would help you and Nicholas very much indeed if we could find that necklace for you. I mean, it really is yours, isn't it? Nobody could argue about that, could they?"

Miss Whiteflower laughed shakily.

"I'm sure they couldn't, Jenny. We can prove that the diamonds were stolen over forty years ago, and if they were found now then they would really belong to Nicholas, I suppose."

There was a long silence which was broken by Tom's whistle of surprise.

"Well, fancy that, as my aunt at Ingles would say. Just fancy that. A nice pile of diamonds for Nicholas! Fancy that!"

4. Seven White Gates

At about noon on the morning after the first visit to Mrs. Quickseed, a larger party of Lone Piners toiled past the cottage pushing loaded bicycles up the hill. Peter was in front with David Morton - a pleasant-looking boy of her own age with an unruly head of hair and a cheerful grin. A few paces behind came Jenny, also pushing a laden bicycle. She was chattering as usual, but her two companions, the Morton twins, were not taking much notice. Finally, and rather disconsolately, came the twins' little black Scottie dog called Macbeth. He was feeling the heat. So were the twins who were also finding their bicycles heavy.

"I do wish you'd listen to me, twins," Jenny was saying. This is the cottage where this boy Nicholas lives. When I've told you everything about him and what has happened it will be quite all right for you to talk to him as much as you like, and anyway we are coming to see him and his aunt this afternoon. But I don't want you to look now 'cos I don't want to speak to them yet. We've got to have a proper meeting of the club first so that I can tell you everything. Of course, it can't be a proper meeting 'cos Tom isn't here. I think his uncle is a brute not to let him come today, but he'll be here soon as he can. I spoke to him on the telephone and he doesn't mind me telling you without him... *Dickie! Please don't stare in there and do hurry. I don't want them to see us.*"

Dickie stopped. Mary stopped and Macbeth sat down in the road outside the gate of Mrs. Quickseed's cottage.

"We do wish you wouldn't be so bossy, Jenny," Dickie said. "Can't you see we're utterly erzausted toilin' up this hill? It's bad enough to have David orderin' us about, but don't you start. There's nobody in the world except our brother David who would make two small twins like us push these ghastly bikes up this hill. It's torture, isn't it, Mary?"

"We used to think you were on our side, Jenny," Mary complained. "It's bad enough for us in this club without you orderin' us about. *Don't stop and*

don't stare and hurry up and don't dawdle and let's put another ton of food on their bikes is the sort of thing we get as soon as the holidays start."

Peter looked over her shoulder and called in a piercing whisper,

"Come on, you lot. Don't wait there. We'll tell you everything presently."

At that moment, two of Mrs. Quickseed's cats walked sedately round the side of the cottage, jumped on the wall by the front gate and began to clean themselves. It was extremely ill-mannered of Macbeth, but he detested proud, independent cats - and that meant all cats - and so, as the wall was only about three feet high, he went into battle. He jumped at the wall and the ginger cat stood up, arched its back and, catching Mackie at the top of his second jump, scratched his ear. Then Mackie hurled himself at the gate, which opened under his weight, and suddenly Mrs. Quickseed's little front garden seemed full of fighting dogs and cats.

"Get him out! Get him out!" Jenny wailed as Mary handed her bicycle to her and ran into the garden. "You must catch us up, twins. They mustn't see us all now."

Dickie leaned his bicycle against the wall and followed his twin into the garden just as Mrs. Quickseed ran round the side of the house with two more cats at her heels. Mary flung herself on Mackie and scooped him up in her arms.

Mrs. Quickseed was trembling with agitation.

"How dare you! You wicked, wicked children. Go away at once and take that horrible dog with you. He was *killing* my pretties - my lovely Rufus and Claribel. I shall report you to the police. *Go away! Your dog is dangerous!*"

"Oh, no, he isn't, Mrs. Birdseed," Dickie said indignantly. "He's a very proud and friendly dog, but there are some people he doesn't like-----"

"And *no* cats that he likes," Mary added. "And we don't blame him. Your wicked, wicked, bloodthirsty cats absolutely attacked him. He was walking

by in the sun, very hot and weary an' he just sort of looked at them and said, 'Good morning' an' - please take him, twin. He's too heavy. An' they flew at him and now I s'pose he'll hate cats and you can't really blame him, can you, Mrs. Quicklime?"

Dickie, who was standing by the gate, glanced up the road, and went on,

"We don't want to be rude, but please don't let your cats attack poor little helpless dogs again. You ought to put a notice on your gate - 'Beware Dangerous Cats'. That's what you ought to do, isn't it, Mary?"

"*Wicked* cats," Mary said demurely. "We shall complain to the policeman... Come with us now, my precious one."

Macbeth, Mary's precious one, scrambled from his mistress's arms as soon as they were outside the gate, barked defiantly and raced up the road after the others, who were resting under a tree out of sight of the cottage. Mrs. Quickseed, looking rather dazed, called her cats and retired.

"Thank you, twins," Jenny said when they came up. "You didn't see Nicholas or Miss Whiteflower, did you?"

"Only the old witch Birdseed," Dickie explained. "We don't think she's got any spells left. You did say she was a witch, didn't you? She's utterly surrounded by fantastic cats who don't like Mackie."

"As usual, you've got too much to say," David said as he got up and hitched his knapsack on his back again. "You ought not to have allowed Mackie to go after the cats... Come on. I want my dinner."

And so some of the Lone Piners came again to the farm with seven white gates. It was high noon of a summer's day and as David opened the first gate the warm scent of the pine wood closed round them, and the only sound was the murmur of wood pigeons in the tree tops. They came to the second white gate, which once had been festooned with barbed wire and locked. Now it was open and so was the next gate which led into the big farmyard. At last they were on level ground. Two cottages were on their left and ahead of them the ugly brick farmhouse, looking shabbier than ever in

the sunshine. Beyond the house were the barns and sheds for the tractors. The largest of the barns with its doors painted white was theirs when they wanted it.

They crossed the farmyard and pushed their bikes into the cool shade of the big barn. It was just as they remembered it - vaulted and pillared like a church, uneven brick floors, cobwebs hanging from the black rafters and all sorts of rusty old implements hanging on the walls. Against the left-hand wall were several wooden partitions which had once been used for storing grain, but which the male Lone Piners now used as sleeping cubicles. In the far corner was the steep staircase leading up to the vast granary which the girls used as a dormitory.

"I'll start unpacking, if you like," David suggested as he slipped off the heavy knapsack. "You girls go to the house and say that we've arrived."

"So you have," a cheerful voice spoke from behind them and they turned to see Peter's Aunt Carol. "Welcome to Seven Gates! We get very dull here... Peter, my dear, you're looking very nice. I like your plaits coiled up like that... I was going to say that it's much too hot to light the old stove for your cooking. You must use the kitchen. I've got lots of bread and milk for you and you know where to find the old trestle table and benches and the crockery. Now I'll leave you alone to settle in."

It didn't take them long. The girls took their sleeping bags upstairs to the granary and spread themselves a large bed of hay while David did the same for himself and Dickie in two of the old grain bins.

The Lone Piners had brought plenty of food and fruit with them and by the time Uncle Micah came in from the fields for his dinner, they were already sitting down to their meal in the sun outside the barn. Micah Sterling was a tall, gaunt man many years older than his wife. He was very fond of Peter, who was his only niece, and had always been fascinated by the twins, who greeted him rapturously.

"No fires in the barn this weather, please," he said in his slow, grave voice. "And I would like you either to go to bed in the dark or to use electric

torches. You are all welcome here as usual... Ah! Jenny Harman, I see. My neighbour. How is your father?"

Jenny replied suitably. She had never quite got over her fear of Micah Sterling because she remembered him when he was feared by everybody in the village. Now he was very different and a good customer of the village shop.

As soon as they were really alone and had finished their meal, David said, "Let's leave the washing up for a bit and get down to business. We want to hear what all the fuss is about. I've never known you so mysterious, Peter. Why wouldn't you tell us what's been happening?"

"Let's go up in the granary," Peter suggested. "It's more private there, and we can see if anybody comes... This is Jenny's adventure, anyway. She began it and made me promise not to tell you and the twins until we had a proper club meeting."

"We utterly agree," Mary said as she got up and stretched inelegantly. "Meetings stop you big ones doing things without us. You can't manage without us and if it wasn't for us, old Birdlime witch would have followed us up here on a broomstick and Mackie would have been torn to little bits by mad cats... Twin! You've eaten too much corned beef. You're yawning."

"I couldn't eat another crumb," he admitted. "It's most peculiar but I seem to get hungrier than ever in hot weather. The only thing that will keep me awake is what Jenny says. I want to hear all about the mysterious boy who lives in Cat Cottage."

They went up into the granary. At the far end, under the gable, was a little dusty window with a pile of hay under it. Under this window Peter had always slept when they came to Seven Gates, and as they all flopped down in the hay Jenny rubbed the dust from the glass and said, "You can see the weathercock on our church tower. The wood gets in the way of what Dickie calls Cat Cottage, but it would be wonderful to have a telescope up here..."

David leaned back against the sun-warmed tiles of the sloping roof and tickled Macbeth, who was turning round and round in the hay.

"Buck up, Jenny. If we can't get this story soon I shall drop off, too. What's it all about?"

"I will tell you now because Tom already knows about it. This isn't a proper Lone Pine meeting because Tom isn't here, but I'll tell you everything if you listen and if you twins don't interrupt."

It was stuffy in the granary. They were all tired, but although Dickie did doze off once or twice Jenny certainly kept David awake. She told them about the sale in Ludlow and the sofa and of the two men who wanted to buy it, and Miss Whiteflower and Nicholas who couldn't afford to bid high enough for either the sofa or the chairs to match. She told them how clever Tom was to remember that one of the men had said something about things being hidden in the sofa and of how he had suggested searching it.

"And then, what do you think, David and twins? You'll never guess so I'll tell you. I actually found an old, old letter on yellow paper and with spidery writing. It's part of a letter really, and it was crammed down low in the crack between the wooden back and the seat, and the terrific thing is that----"

"JENNY!" David shouted. "Where is it? Can't you show us?"

"I haven't got it here. Peter has seen it and so, of course, has Tom. You have all got to jolly well listen now and don't interrupt. Miss Whiteflower has got the letter, but presently we're going to see her. She's practically promised that we shall help her in her great quest to help the Whiteflowers and Nicholas. It's a diamond necklace, you see."

"What!" Dickie yelled. "I was nearly asleep but what you said sounded like diamond necklace. Who's got a diamond necklace? Where is it?"

"It's what I said," Jenny protested petulantly. "You just won't listen. It's all to do with the Whiteflower diamonds that were stolen years and years ago," and she went on to repeat what Miss Whiteflower had told them yesterday about the young housekeeper, Harriet Brown, who was believed to have stolen the necklace, hidden it while the house was being searched by the police, and then seemingly hidden it somewhere else, in or near water, in a

panic during a great storm, and of how she was found drowned on the following day.

David had forgotten about dozing off now. "But this is terrific, Jen! How could you wait to tell us? Does this Miss Whiteflower really believe that there is a chance of finding the necklace after all these years? Doesn't the woman's letter give any idea where she hid it? And what is this place where it all happened?"

"You can ask her all those things presently, David, and see the letter, too," Peter said. "We thought it a good idea to promise to help her and told her you were coming today. She's thinking it over with Nicholas, but you do see that although Jenny's dad bought the sofa we did feel that the letter ought to be seen by the Whiteflowers. None of us knows anything about Bringewood Manor but we'll look it up on the map. The nearest village is Bringewood Chase and that's about eight miles from Ludlow."

"What's this Nicholas boy like?" Mary asked. "Diamonds are a new sort of adventure for us, but Dickie an' me like a change sometimes... Tell us about Nicholas. How old is he? We don't want any more in our club or on our holiday. We've got enough already, haven't we, twin?"

Dickie agreed.

"Of course. But, Jenny, do you acksherley mean that there might be a real diamond necklace worth millions and millions hidden in a place nobody has found, in a place we've never seen, and you found the only clue? Do you acksherley mean that?"

"Yes, I do. It's as exciting as that. It really is."

"Then we must go there and see it," Dickie said as he got up. "Now, if you like. We want a big, fast, red car or a helicopter, *but let's go!* We must break up this camp now and make a new one over there by all that water and see this big house and search everywhere-----"

"What about Nicholas?" Mary said tersely. "Tell us about him. I bet he's awful and we don't partickerly want to go and make a camp in a new place

if he's horrible. The diamonds aren't as important as that."

"P'raps you're right, Mary," Peter said. "It's just that it looks like another adventure. I may as well tell you now that you won't like Nicholas. He's about twelve with nearly white hair and rather silly and shy and rude, too."

"He might not be as bad as that," Jenny said. "You're not fair to him. His father was killed in the war and now his mother has died and there doesn't seem to be any money left so they've sold the Manor and it's going to be broken down and little houses built there. He's probably sad and miserable and very lonely. I'm sure he wanted to be friends with me but he's shy and kept running away."

Peter said, "Nicholas wasn't friendly yesterday. He was rude, but he is shy and unhappy as Jen says. What do you think of it all, David? We Shropshire Lone Piners think we've been quite clever without the Mortons. This looks like the start of something, doesn't it?"

"Of course it does. It's terrific and maybe Dickie is right and we'll have to go over there. Never mind about the white-headed boy for a sec. What about Miss Whiteflower? What's she like?... There's another thing, Jenny. Surely if we could find the rest of this letter - the other sheets of it, I mean - there might be a better clue to where that woman hid the necklace?"

"You'll see the letter, David," Jenny protested. "Of course, if we could find anything else written by her it would be easier, but there's nothing more in our sofa. We think the woman must have hidden those sheets of paper there very quickly when somebody interrupted her. Then perhaps something tragic or awful happened and she ran out into the storm and was never seen again... Miss Whiteflower is nice. Tweedy and quiet and quite old. She's all that Nicholas has got, you see."

"Let's go and see her," Dickie said. "We may as well tell you now that we don't like Nicholas and we're not very keen on those cats. But let's go. Do we stay to tea?"

"I'm not sure," Peter said. "P'raps we could if we're asked. But there are too many of us and they're poor. And another thing. If we go now you can't take

Mackie. By the noise we heard this morning he must have killed three of old Quickseed's cats."

"Acksherley you're generally fair to us, Peter, but now you're not. You're a brute, like the others. Acksherley Mackie defended himself bravely against a *flock* of wild cats. All different colours, weren't they, Dickie?"

"Of course. Yellow, red, brown, black, blue and primrose. Some had spots and some had stripes and the one that was the worst had stripes going from back to front and up and down if you know what we mean-----"

"Like a draught board," Mary added triumphantly. "An' some had long whiskers an'-----"

"Shut up," David shouted. "Of course you can't take Mackie. You'll have to ask Aunt Carol to look after him until we come back. Come on. Let's get tidied up and go."

Half an hour later they were on their way without Mackie, who was left with Aunt Carol. It was cool in the pine wood and Jenny, who had never before had such a chance to introduce her friends to such a fine new adventure, chattered away cheerfully about diamond necklaces and the beautiful young woman who stole them from somebody else and then lost her life.

"It's just like a book, really. Better than a story because we know that it happened in long ago times that were most romantic. Miss Whiteflower could be really romantic but now she's just sad, and I hope you twins will be very, very kind to her."

"And don't you be too clever with Nicholas, either," Peter added. "I don't suppose any of us will like him much, but give him a chance... Don't look so smug, Dickie."

"I'm not smug. I'm jolly serious. We're not interested in Nicholas. We're interested in Mackie who's been forced to stay behind. You bully him and us too. We're fed up. We expect all this story is lies really."

"Pack of lies," Mary corrected him. "Just not true."

"*Please*, twins," Jenny begged them. "Please don't remind Mrs. Quickseed, if we see her, about Mackie. She may be very angry and we don't want anybody upset in that house until Miss Whiteflower says we can help her."

"You said Birdseed was a witch," Mary protested. "It doesn't matter what we do to her, does it? Don't you worry about us. We'll do a spell on her."

David and Peter were now well in front and so did not hear the twins teasing Jenny, but when they came in sight of the cottage they saw, to their surprise, Nicholas sitting on the garden wall in the sunshine.

"Hullo," Peter greeted him. "This is our friend, David Morton. Your aunt is expecting us, isn't she? David - this is Nicholas Whiteflower. We were telling you about him."

Nicholas nodded. He seemed to be making a tremendous effort to be friendly.

"Yes, of course she is. We're going to have tea out of doors. I just thought I'd wait here for you. It's not much fun indoors."

Then Jenny and the twins came up. The latter looked very carefully at Nicholas and then at each other. Jenny saw the glance that passed between them and hastily said, "Hullo, Nicholas. Here we are, you see, just as we promised."

He nodded again and then, to their surprise, slipped down from the wall and went over to the twins. He was red in the face and stuttered a little as he said, "I s-say. I s-saw you two from up that t-tree this morning. You did-did-didn't see me but I saw your super dog go for her cats. I hate those cats. I don't want them to be hurt but I don't w-w-want them here. Where's your dog? Why haven't you brought him? There are two of those cats up in the tree now."

He was right. An orange cat and a stripy cat were glaring at them from the lowest branch of a holly tree in the corner of the garden, and another was

cleaning itself on the sun-warmed window-ledge of the front room.

"If your dog was here now that cat would soon be out of sight, wouldn't it?" Nicholas went on. "I like your dog very much. I wish you'd brought him. What are your names? I'm Nicholas Whiteflower, but I suppose Jenny has told you all about me."

Mary smiled at him. She was prepared to like anyone who admired Mackie.

"Were you waiting outside *specially* to see us and our dog, Nicholas? My brother and the others *forced* us to leave Mackie at home because the cats are afraid of him."

Nicholas nodded, suddenly shy again.

"Yes. I like dogs. I like him. I want to see him again. I wish I had a dog like yours."

Dickie looked at him suspiciously. He wasn't sure of Nicholas yet and Mary seemed in too much of a hurry to be friendly just because he made a fuss of Mackie. Before he could say anything, however, Miss Whiteflower came out of the cottage to greet them. Perhaps she knew all about the morning's encounter between Macbeth and Mrs. Quickseed's cats, but she did not refer to it when she suggested that, as there were so many of them, they were going out for a picnic tea.

"I've got everything ready and I thought that Jenny would know of a good place near. We have so much to talk about and there really isn't room in our one room in the cottage. Shall we do that? The picnic baskets are on the table so perhaps the twins would fetch them with Nicholas."

They were all impressed by this suggestion and ten minutes later were sitting in the shade of an oak tree at the top of a field opposite the cottage. And while they were eating buns and drinking tea and lemonade Miss Whiteflower, addressing herself particularly to David, told them again the story of Harriet Brown and the stolen necklace and showed him the letter which Jenny and Tom had found in the sofa. The twins, who were always quick to decide whether they liked grown-ups or not, behaved very sensibly

and did not try any of their silly tricks with her. They, too, were touched by Jenny's remark that it seemed as if Harriet had been drowned only a few hours after writing the letter which David was now reading, with Peter looking over his shoulder.

"I believe that this is all that the distracted Harriet Brown wrote," Miss Whiteflower said quietly. "She was interrupted - probably by the police again - pushed the sheets of paper into the sofa and then for some reason that we shall never know, went out into the storm. What do you think of it all, David?"

David handed back the letter, looked at Peter and smiled.

"I think it's a wonderful story, Miss Whiteflower, and if you will allow us to do so, and if our parents agree, we'd like to try and help you. We're up in Shropshire for five or six weeks, we all know each other well and have had some adventures together. You said that your old house, the Manor, is now being knocked down, but none of us have seen it or the gorge-----"

"I'll show you. Let me show it to you," Nicholas said. "We lived there. I'll come with you and show you everything. You can't do without me."

"It's only yesterday you told us that this was nothing to do with us," Jenny said hotly. "You didn't want our help or anything to do with us. You just let David finish what he was saying."

Nicholas flushed and turned away. Miss Whiteflower said nothing beyond, "Go on, please, David."

"I was going to say that we could all cycle over tomorrow, and then if it's possible we might pack up from Seven Gates and go and camp there somewhere and explore it all. Suppose the necklace is hidden in the house after all and the housebreakers find it? What happens then?"

"But the letter finishes with the words 'where the water', David," Peter said. "I suppose that might be a big cistern or something. Were there cisterns in those days, Miss Whiteflower?"

Miss Whiteflower laughed. "Of course there were, and I suppose there are worse hiding places than a cistern at the top of the house, but surely Harriet said something about 'going out'? Anyway, I think that David's idea that you should go to Bringewood tomorrow is good. You can see what it's like and Nicholas will show you round. There are wonderful camping places down by the river, and I think I had better write to Mr. and Mrs. Morton and explain all that has happened. Mr. Harman knows all about it, doesn't he, Jenny, but what about your friend Tom?"

"It's terribly worrying about Tom, Miss Whiteflower. I don't want to go on any adventure without him, but if his uncle is ready to start on the harvest then Tom will have to stay and help him. We can always telephone him, anyway. Perhaps Mr. Ingles will give him some more time off. The quicker we start the better."

Miss Whiteflower nodded and then glanced at Nicholas, who was sitting a few yards away, jabbing a penknife into the turf. Then she looked steadily at David. "You'll take Nicholas with you, of course. He has a bicycle and camping things, too - a sleeping bag and a tent. I didn't sell those."

"Of course we will," Peter said quickly. "We can't explore Bringewood properly without him, but don't let's fix anything definite about a camp until we've seen the place and found out when they're going to knock the house down. I'd like to look in the cistern, too."

This eased the situation. David nodded. Nicholas looked up and said, "Jolly good idea. I'd like to show you everything and I'll be ready whatever time you say in the morning. It's a long bike ride so we'd better start early."

Jenny didn't say much. She was lying on her back looking at the blue sky through a dappled screen of oak leaves and wondering what Harriet Brown had looked like.

Before the Lone Piners left, Miss Whiteflower said she would put the important letter in a safe place after a copy had been made for them, and promised to write to Mr. Morton. She also asked Peter more about Seven Gates and said that she would like to meet her Aunt Carol soon.

Then they all went back to the cottage together.

Jenny said she must go home and telephone Tom to find out whether he could come with them tomorrow. The Mortons and Peter arranged to call for Nicholas at half past eight next morning and warned Jenny that she must be ready at nine. Then they thanked Miss Whiteflower and went back through the wood to Seven Gates.

Dickie yawned as they walked over to the big barn. "It's most peculiar but I'm nearly hungry again. Let's have supper soon."

It was when Peter and Mary went into the house to wash that Aunt Carol, who was cooking her husband's supper, asked them if they'd found Mackie. When they looked at her in surprise she said that he had run out when she opened the door during the afternoon and gone into the wood.

"Don't look so tragic, Mary. He'll come back. I expect he was trying to find you and then got deflected by a rabbit. We've got a few rabbits back in the woods now and Mackie is welcome to any of them... You can come and cook your own suppers in ten minutes, and then I want to hear what else you've been up to - unless it's a secret, of course."

But Mary was very upset and went into the wood calling the dog, and then ran back to persuade Dickie to come and make a search party. She was furious when David told her that Mackie always did find his way back and that he knew this country almost as well as Witchend.

"We'll all go after supper, Mary. He can't be far away but do stop fussing. It's no use just the two of you going now."

"He's hurt. He's been run over. He's been attacked by those awful cats. Not even my twin cares now. I'm the only unselfish one who really loves him..."

Peter quietened her down, but she fidgeted with her supper instead of eating it and sat staring wide-eyed across the long shadows in the farmyard to where the sun was going down in a blaze of glory behind the wood.

Dickie put down his knife and fork.

"All right, twin," he said suddenly. "I'll come with you. I couldn't come before because I was famished."

Mary jumped up happily and, at that moment, Nicholas walked across the farmyard with Mackie in his arms.



Nicholas walked across the farmyard with Mackie in his arms.

"Hullo," he said. "I've found you. Here's your dog. He was in the wood near our cottage. He's hurt his foot. Barbed wire, I should think. He can only walk on three legs so I carried him."

Mackie squirmed out of his arms, and with little whines and frenzied yelps of delight flung himself at Mary who was down on her knees in the dust.

Nicholas stayed where he was, stared straight ahead and then began to speak again. His face was streaked with dirt and sweat. Mackie's blood had stained his shirt and he'd scratched his knee badly.

"Something I wanted to say," he said steadily. "I was coming up to say it when I found your dog. Wanted to say I was sorry for being so rude ever since I met you. Specially Jenny, but I'll tell her tomorrow - if you'll let me come with you. Things haven't been too good lately and I say things I can't believe I'm saying, but I'd like to come with you if I may tomorrow... I mean, I only want to come if you'd like me to and-----"

"Hi!" Peter shouted. "That's enough of that, Nicky. Come and sit down here and have some supper. Mary will ask Uncle Micah to look at Mackie and I'll cook you some baked beans."

She pretended not to see the tears in his eyes as he gave her a shaky smile and sat down beside her.

5. The Gorge

Peter was the first of the Lone Piners to wake the next morning. A gleam of sunshine struck through the little window above her head, and as she turned drowsily in her sleeping-bag she was aware of the lovely smell of hay and remembered where she was.

She turned over again and saw the dust dancing in the sunbeams. A few feet away Mary, on her back, was snoring as gently as a purring kitten. At the foot of her sleeping-bag Macbeth was rousing. He raised his head, and seeing Peter watching him he gently wagged his tail. His injured leg was bound in a clean bandage and he got up rather self-consciously, hobbled across the hay, sniffed at Mary's ear on the way and then settled down on Peter's lap.

She looked at her watch. Ten minutes to seven. If she went over to the house now Aunt Carol would give her a cup of tea. She moved Mackie, scrambled out of the sleeping-bag and dressed as quietly and quickly as she could. Mary slept on, and Peter lifted the dog back on her sleeping-bag before creeping down the narrow stairs into the barn. David was sound asleep in one of the cubicles and Dickie in the next. Aunt Carol was in the big kitchen.

"Your uncle is out already. Run upstairs and wash and then we'll have a cup of tea and a gossip."

They were still gossiping half an hour later when the twins came over in their pyjamas, grumbling because they were being neglected. Mackie, on three legs and in quite good spirits, came with them and David arrived a few minutes later. Aunt Carol suggested that breakfast indoors for once wouldn't hurt them, and that as they were going out for the day she would spoil them with bacon and eggs and sausages. She promised, too, that she would not let Macbeth out of her sight and that Uncle Micah would look at his leg again at dinner time.

After breakfast they packed up some sandwiches while David studied the one-inch map. Bringewood Manor was marked and so was the gorge. At first he was puzzled by a black dotted line with arrows pointing to the east. This line ran right across country, crossing the river where it first entered the gorge. He traced it back towards the Welsh border until he was able to read the words, "Elan Aqueduct (Birmingham Corporation Water Works)". This looked interesting, and when he next saw Peter's father, who looked after a reservoir at Hatchholt, he must remember to ask him about it.

He was rather worried by the distance from Barton to Bringewood but he dared not suggest that the twins should stay behind. They cycled well and sensibly, but it was going to be hot and if either of them flagged the expedition would be held up, and they couldn't stay at Bringewood overnight. When they went back to the barn he asked Peter what she thought.

"It's not quite so far from Witchend or Ingles. If we can't get back here tonight, I suppose you or Mr. Ingles could put us up for a night? We can't leave the twins behind, but it's going to be very hot today. Let's start now."

Mary insisted that Mackie should not see them go and they were in good time when they said good-bye to Aunt Carol and pushed their bicycles down the soft track between the pine trees to the road. Nicholas was already waiting for them and actually sitting on his bicycle against the garden wall of Mrs. Quickseed's cottage.

"Hullo," he said as they pulled up. "How's Mackie? Pity he can't come. He'd like hunting the water rats in the river."

"We haven't examined his wound, Nicholas," Mary explained. "But he's in capable hands - *and*, twin," she added, "there is no need for you to snigger when I speak like that. You must try and learn to do the same... But thank you for asking, Nicholas."

Nicholas looked bewildered until Peter smiled at him and told him that he'd get used to the twins when he knew them better.

"Before we start," Nicholas said to David, "I'd like to give you this. It's a copy of Harriet Brown's letter. I wrote it out last night before I went to bed. Aunt Margaret has got the real letter locked up somewhere, but you're in charge of this expedition so I thought you should have it."

The twins were impressed by this sort of talk and by such a reasonable point of view. David nodded his thanks and put the important document in an inner section of his wallet.

"Aunt Margaret isn't coming out," Nicholas went on. "I've brought rations like you said, so shall we go?"

The village of Barton Beach was astir and the door of the Post Office was open when they left their bicycles against the curb. Mr. Harman, in his shirt-sleeves, was sorting out a pile of daily papers and nodded as they came in.

"Off for the day again, Jenny tells me. Don't you get yourselves mixed up in anything unpleasant over at Bringewood. I'm not so sure I like the sound of it all... I'm wondering whether we'd all have been better off if I'd never bought the sofa, or if Jen and Tom had never found the letter... She's on the telephone to him now."

"Get her out of the box, please, Peter," David said. "If she's talking to Tom we'll never get away."

Peter laughed and ran to the back of the shop and opened the door of the telephone box.

Jenny's voice was loud and clear.

"Oh, *Tom*! It would be so wonderful if you could. If we make a camp there tomorrow, I shan't go unless you can come, too. Ask Mr. Ingles specially from me... You must have a holiday sometimes. It isn't fair... You work too hard, Tom. Yes, you do... Oh. Hullo!... You *have* come early... No, Tom. Not you. It's the others. They're here and they're being very rude and interrupting. I must go, Tom, but I'll make them all come back your way

tonight and we'll tell you everything that has happened... Yes. I promise we will... Goodbye."

She put the receiver down and turned round. Her face was red and shining, for it was hot in the telephone box and she had been shut inside for some time.

"That was Tom," she explained unnecessarily and then, when they laughed, she turned to Nicholas and said, "I don't take any notice of them, Nicholas. You cycle with me and show them the way. I hope that my bike tyres are hard and that David has got a good pump... Hullo, twins. Feeling fit?"

"You haven't asked after Mackie. Don't you want to know where he is?" Mary said. "He's sore wounded."

"Sore and wounded? What do you mean? Come and get my bike from the yard and tell me about him."

Dickie and Nicholas went, too, but it was ten minutes before they finally got away, taking the same road as Mr. Harman had driven Jenny and Tom only two days ago. They stopped for a rest in Craven Arms where, one cold winter's day, they had taken the road to a strange adventure in the forgotten little town of Clun (*The Secret of Grey Walls*). After that the road ran close beside the sparkling River Onny and so they came to Onibury where the road crossed the railway and on to Bromfield where Nicholas turned sharp right at a crossroads and explained that there was no need to go into Ludlow, or even as far as the village of Bringewood. This road was hilly and they often had to push their cycles, but the twins made no complaint and listened eagerly to Nicholas as he tried to explain the country.

"When we get to the top of this hill we shan't have to walk any more. We can coast right down to a path that leads into the gorge. The Manor is over there on the other side, but you can't see it from here because of the trees. I suppose they'll cut them down as soon as they can. People are always cutting down trees now."

They mounted at the top of the hill and whizzed down a winding road between the woods. Nicholas spurred ahead and then, putting out his hand

and braking sharply, he turned into a sandy track leading off to the left. They followed him cautiously and when he jumped off on a stretch of turf, marked with the black rings of burnt-out picnic fires, they did the same.

"How long now, Nicky, and when do we eat?" Dickie asked.

David looked at his watch. Ten to one.

"Where do you want to take us first, Nicholas? Don't forget we ought to see the house as soon as we can if it's going to be knocked down. You'd better lead the way."

This was the moment for which Nicholas had been waiting. For the first time since Jenny had seen him dodging away from everybody in the village street he looked excited and cheerful.

"O.K.," he said a little breathlessly. "Leave the bikes here but we might as well take the rations. I'll show you the gorge first. The Manor is up on the other side and you can't see it from here. The only path is on this side of the river and the only way to cross it is by an old bridge... Years and years ago, when I was quite a kid - younger than the twins - and before I went away to school, I used to spend days and days down here. I know it sounds soppy but all this was my secret kingdom and the river was the Amazon and there were pygmies in the undergrowth and I used to shoot poisoned arrows-----"

"Real poison?" Dickie asked,

"Real pygmies?" from Mary.

"Well, *practically*, if you know what I mean. Anyway, you come and see it," and he led the way down the steep track under a tunnel of trees until they saw the river ahead. At this point on its journey to the sea, the Teme changed its character and appearance. The Lone Piners had many times seen it splashing over the weir at Ludlow and sparkling in the sunshine as it ran under the battlements of that ancient town. Nearer to its source, and before it reached the gorge, it meandered through pleasant water meadows, and even when there was very little water in its shallow bed it ran fast. But here it changed. Now it was sullen and deep in the limestone gorge where it

had been cutting through the soft rock for hundreds of years, and the Lone Piners, standing on the bank, wondered what it would look like when the rain on the Welsh border brought the storm waters rushing downstream, tearing at the banks and roaring into the gorge.

"It would be frightening," Jenny said. "What a creepy place, Nicholas! It is like the Amazon and the jungle if we knew what they were like... Whatever's that?"

About fifty yards to their right the gorge was crossed by a bridge carrying three great iron pipes. David scrambled up a rough track towards it and the others followed as Nicholas said, "It's the aqueduct. You can't get on to the bridge. There's no way over. The iron fence is spiked."

When they reached the end of the bridge, David said, "I wonder if these pipes were here when the diamonds were stolen? The last words of the letter were 'where the water', weren't they? I wonder if Harriet Brown hid the necklace anywhere near here? What happens to the pipes the other side, Nicky?"

"They climb a hill at the side of our grounds and then down the other side into a wood," Nicholas explained. "I don't know how long they've been there, but we'll ask Aunt Margaret. She'll know. Anyway, I don't see how Harriet Brown could have climbed the iron fence if it was there then. Come down now and we'll walk along the river to the bridge."

The gorge ran nearly straight for more than a quarter of a mile. They walked in single file along the path on the left bank. Between the path and the cliffs which rose almost sheer to a height of nearly a hundred feet the undergrowth was dense. The air was heavy with the scent of cow-parsley and the fruit of the elder trees hung in purple clusters. The face of the cliffs, like many limestone formations, was irregular and Peter asked Nicholas whether it was possible to climb them.

"I did once," he admitted. "There are some little caves, and I think the best way to explore those would be on the end of a rope let down from the top. We could try easily enough. One of the twins could be let down. They're small."

"Thank you for the suggestion, Nicholas," Mary said coldly. "Just because you were kind to our dog there is no need for you to be funny about us being small."

"Acksherley," Dickie added, "you are not so big and we think you are skinny but we're too polite to mention it... *And* we are good on ropes, as my brother knows."

"So you are, Dickie," David said hurriedly. "The puzzle is, though, that if we need a rope to go down the cliff, how could Harriet Brown have managed by herself in a storm?"

"We don't know that she was by herself when she went out into the storm," Jenny said. "We don't know enough about her. I think she was a sad, sad woman even if she was a thief, and I'm very sorry for her although I s'pose I ought not to be... What are the cliffs like on the other side, Nicky? As steep as these?"

"No. You can't see from here because the trees are so thick but those cliffs are very rough and overgrown and dangerous. They're steep, of course, and there isn't a path along the river on that side. There didn't really have to be because all the land over there between the bridge and the aqueduct belongs to the Manor. I haven't been down there for a long time. Here's the old bow bridge. Shall we eat now or go up to the house first?"

Before any of them could answer the silence was broken by the throb of an engine and the horrible rattle of a pneumatic drill.

"They've started," David said grimly. "We'd better go up and see what's happening. Peter wants to look in the cistern. Lead on, Nicky."

The old bridge would have been dangerous to cross in the dark, for although the arch itself was of stone, the rest of it was of timber, much of which was rotting so that they could see the water below through the holes at their feet. To their left, the river wandered pleasantly through a meadow for a quarter of a mile and then returned to the line of cliffs which it had deserted at the bridge. The other bank was flat but well wooded.

"Behind these trees where you're looking," Nicholas said to Jenny, 'there's an empty cottage, almost in ruins, and an old water mill. They're creepy places. Full of bats and rats. I'll show you some time.'

Then he led them up a narrow path which climbed the steep field before them. They were out of breath before they reached the top, and when they stopped and turned they could see the little bridge and the river twisting through the meadow, but the gorge was hidden behind its screen of trees.

From the top of the hill the Lone Piners saw Bringewood Manor for the first time. Although it was certainly more than a quarter of a mile distant they saw at once how big it was. And ugly, too. Nobody spoke for a long moment until the drill started again; then Nicholas said, "Even if they are knocking it down I used to live there, and I don't see why I shouldn't show it you. Let's see how many men there are."

As they got nearer they saw that from one corner of the roof of the mansion rose a short, square tower with imitation battlements. The porch was pillared, the empty windows stared like blind eyes and there was creeper on the walls. At the far end of the drive was a hut with smoke coming from a small chimney in the roof. Beyond that, at the corner of the house farthest from the tower, was the throbbing engine.

A thin, dark man with a cigarette stuck to his lip and a blue beret on the back of his head stood outside the hut and watched them approach in silence.

"Don't like the look of him," David whispered. "No funny business, twins. This chap won't be interested in your antics."

The twins looked meaningfully at each other but said nothing. Then the man spoke without removing the cigarette.

"What do you want? This place is private."

"I used to live here," Nicholas said quickly. "My name is Whiteflower. I just want to show my friends the house before you bash it down. Thanks very

much," and followed by his admiring friends he walked across the drive and through the open front door.

"Hi, you!" the man shouted feebly. "Hi! You can't do that... Well, don't be long, anyway."

The drill started again but was only used intermittently and it sounded a long way off.

"I won't show you every room," Nicholas said. "The house is enormous. It's funny, too, but now that it's empty it doesn't seem like our home any more. It looks dead, doesn't it? Smells stuffy and foul, too. Do you really want to see the cistern, Peter?"

"Why not? You could hide a necklace in a cistern, couldn't you? You could just drop it in the water."

Nicholas led them up several staircases on which their feet sounded hollow and on which the dust was thick. On the topmost floor at the far end of the corridor, Nicholas opened a door leading into a long attic with a sloping roof.

"There you are," he said to Peter. "When I was a kid I was terrified of this room. The water makes horrible noises. It hisses and gurgles and whispers. I've never known it quiet before but of course nobody is using any water out of it so it doesn't fill up. Help me with the lid, please, David, and then Peter can look in."

They lifted the wooden lid off the huge tank without much difficulty. The water inside was still and clear and there was enough light for them to see that there was no diamond necklace at the bottom.

"Oh, well," Peter sighed. That's another illusion gone. I was hoping that we might find it here. I still think the cistern was a good idea. Water, you see."

"There's an old well in the grounds," Nicholas said. "There's a lot of water in that, too. I must show you... Tell you what we'll do now before I show

you my room. We'll look at the housekeeper's room, where the sofa and chairs in the sale were."

They followed him down two staircases and then along a corridor with a window at the end.

Nicholas, who was in front, stopped suddenly and held up his hand in warning. Some very odd sounds were coming from behind a closed door - muttered voices and the noise of splintering wood.

"The house-breakers must be working inside the house," he said quietly. "I don't see why you shouldn't see the room anyway," and he pushed open the door.

None of them ever forgot their first sight of the housekeeper's room at Bringewood Manor - the room in which poor Harriet had hidden the sheets of the unfinished letter. It was quite large with two windows. The wallpaper was a hideous red, faded in places where pictures had once hung, and the bare floor was dusty; but they remembered these things only later.

On their knees before the old fireplace, two men were tearing up the floorboards. Each had a steel jemmy in his hand as they turned in astonishment to see so many children in the open doorway.

One of the men was fat, pale and collarless and the other was dressed in a brown tweed suit and was wearing steel-rimmed spectacles. He was the first to get to his feet.

"Get out!" he snarled. "Get out and stay out. This place is private. How did you get in? What do you want here?"

Nicholas and David both opened their mouths to reply but the fat man, from his knees on the dusty floor, raised his jemmy threateningly and spoke first.

"Get out before we throw you out. All of you. Don't you dare to show your faces here again. I mean it. There'll be trouble for you wherever you come from or whoever you are. *Get out.*"

Jenny pulled Peter by the sleeve. David pushed the twins into the corridor and then stood in front of Nicholas as the two men rushed at them. One of them hit David in the chest and in a few seconds the Lone Piners and Nicholas were in the corridor again and the door was slammed in their faces.

"Well!" Jenny whispered excitedly. "What do you think of that?" This was a particularly silly question but was followed by a much more sensible observation. "You saw them, didn't you, Nicky? You've seen them before. So have I. So has Tom. Those men aren't housebreakers. They're the two men who came into the sale room at Ludlow and tried to buy our sofa. I'll never forget them."

6. The Noise in the Night

Two days later the Lone Piners and Nicholas were together again and on their way to camp at Bringewood Manor. Miss Whiteflower had written to Mr. and Mrs. Morton, who had come over in the car to see her. Mr. Ingles agreed to give Tom a few days off; and Peter had no difficulty with her father, who was always content for her to be with the Mortons.

But Jenny's stepmother was very difficult. At first she refused to let her go. She had never been able to understand that Jenny needed companionship of her own age both at school and at home. Oddly enough she was disinterested in the Whiteflower diamonds and seemed to think that they were all making up the story as an excuse to go camping.

Not even when she was reminded about the letter found in the sofa did she take it seriously. "Just a child's trick," she had muttered. "I've said it before and I'll say it again: I can't see any sense in Jen going off on a jaunt like this. Like as not it will pour with rain and she'll catch cold and we shall have to nurse her, and what with the shop and no help in the house-----" and it was at this stage that Jenny burst into tears and ran out of the room. She never knew how her father had won the battle for her.

In the end it was arranged that David, the twins and Tom Ingles would be taken in Mr. Morton's car from Witchend, while Mr. Harman - who would not be denied a journey to see the gorge - was to take Peter, Jenny and Nicholas from Barton. They managed to get tents, sleeping bags, provisions into the two cars and their bicycles on the roofs and arranged to meet at the entrance to Ludlow castle at eleven o'clock.

Jenny, remembering the incident of the cows on their last journey in Boy Blue, hoped that neither Peter nor Nicholas would wish they were in the Morton's car. As it happened Nicholas, who had never in his life seen such an amazing car as Mr. Harman's, was, like Tom, so fascinated by its performance and the way in which it was driven, that he would have travelled in it without complaint until it fell to pieces. As for Peter, she loved horses, and often felt sick in cars.

Mr. Harman was in excellent spirits when he drove up to the first of the white gates to collect Peter. He was wearing his old holiday suit of speckly greyish-green tweed and a tweedy hat to match. With great difficulty and a noisy clashing of gears he managed to turn Boy Blue in the road.

"Good morning, my dear!" he shouted as he struggled with the wheel. "Very nice day for a nice trip... Jenny is down at Quickseed's with Nicholas and we'll pick them up... Ah! This little engine may be noisy but it's very powerful."

The first part of this statement about the car was certainly true. The second was not.

"You'd better sit in the back with Jenny and let the boy come in front with me. Most boys like to get some ideas about driving a car... I'm afraid you'll have to put that knapsack of yours on the floor. It would be most unwise to open the boot. We got your tent and sleeping bag in last night and your bikes are safe on the top. That's splendid. At last we're facing the right way. Jump in."

Peter got in cautiously and was at once thankful that Jenny was small, for there was not much room left on the back seat.

Miss Whiteflower was waiting at the cottage gate with Jenny and Nicholas when Boy Blue arrived. If she was surprised by Mr. Harman's hat or his car she was much too polite to show it.

"What fun," she said. "I almost wish I were coming with you. Good luck, and I hope you will send your relations a postcard every now and then just to let them know how you are getting on. May I speak to you, Peter?"

Peter got out as the others got in and piled more bundles on the filthy floor of the car.

"What is it, Miss Whiteflower?"

"I only wanted to say that I know you and David are both sensible. You two are really responsible for all the others, and although you may think that I

am a fussy old woman, I am responsible for Nicholas and his future. Don't do anything stupid and if you do get into trouble you can always find a telephone box and ring Harmans' shop... And one more thing, Peter. Don't bathe in the gorge. The river can be dangerous, and I know it sounds silly but the Whiteflowers don't like the gorge and since Harriet Brown was drowned there they like it still less... Keep an eye on Nicholas. He's already happier than he's been for months... I don't expect you to find the diamonds but I do hope you'll all have fun. Good-bye, my dear, and remember what I say about the river. Be careful of it," and she bent forward and kissed Peter on the cheek.

As soon as Boy Blue began to get really warm his inside smelled of hot oil and Peter felt most uncomfortable. Jenny chattered unceasingly while Nicholas, whiter than ever with excitement, sat entranced on the front seat.

They had two narrow escapes and one stop for water for the radiator before they reached Ludlow.

While Mr. Harman was burning his hands on the hot cap of the radiator, Peter said, "Neither of you have told any of the grown-ups about the two men we found pulling up the floorboards, have you? You remember we agreed not?"

Jenny's eyes widened with dismay. "Of *course* not, Peter! We swore a Lone Pine oath that we wouldn't. Why do you ask?"

"Only because I'm wondering whether we should have done. If we had told them I'm sure they wouldn't have let us come. You didn't tell your aunt, did you, Nicholas?"

He shook his head. "'Course not... Does your car *always* boil over, Jenny? Is that why your dad carries a can of cold water?"

"That's it, Nicky. My dad's wonderful, really. He thinks of everything," and Nicholas was so surprised that he didn't know what to say.

And so they came to Ludlow again, and when Boy Blue stopped with a tired sort of wheeze in the car park by the castle gates, the Mortons and

Tom were already waiting for them. Macbeth, with one leg swathed in adhesive bandage, ran over with the twins to greet them. Mr. Morton shook hands with Jenny and Nicholas and then went off with Mr. Harman, leaving the Lone Piners time to buy themselves ices.

"Were your parents all right about everything, David?" Peter asked. "Was your mother fussy about the twins? I suppose we've got to have them with us again?"

Mary answered, "Acksherley, Peter, we know you're trying to be funny so we will not bother to inform you that we shall be with you until we have found those diamonds for Nicholas. You haven't asked after Mackie, but he is better since yesterday, thank you, and he would like to lick out your ice-cream carton before you put it in that rubbish thing."

"Which we hope you will," Dickie added.

"Enjoy your car journey?" Tom asked Peter. "How many times did you stop to fill up?"

Peter licked her wooden spoon and gave the carton to Mackie.

"I was terrified, Tom. Mr. Harman's car seems to suit Jenny but it makes me feel sick. You can sit with her on the way to the gorge and I'd like to go now because we must make a decent camp and Dickie will soon be hungry."

The two men came back soon afterwards and they packed into the cars again with Peter in the Mortons' and Tom and Jenny together in Boy Blue with Nicholas. Mr. Morton tactfully suggested that Mr. Harman should lead the way and both cars were approaching the top of the wooded hill when a horse-drawn caravan came out of the shadows into the sunshine and stopped at the roadside for the horse to rest. It was Jenny who shouted, "Stop, Dad! Stop! Please stop. It's Reuben and Miranda."

Peter, in the following car, recognized their gypsy friends almost as soon, and so the two cars pulled up behind each other almost opposite the caravan. All the children, except Nicholas, ran across the road to greet the gypsies but Peter, who had once saved the life of their little girl, Fenella,

was the first to reach the trio. Then she stopped, feeling suddenly shy as she often did when she met Miranda.

The caravan was very smart. It was gaily painted with red and yellow sides and wheels. The roof was green and so were the shafts and there were white lace curtains in the windows. Smoke was coming from the little chimney, and from the pipe between the teeth of the brown-faced Reuben, who swept off his hat when he recognized them. Miranda looked very handsome with a coloured scarf over her head and big, golden rings in her ears. Fenella, who was only a few months older than the twins, had been leading the horse up the hill and now stood by its head smiling shyly at them all.

"The children from Witchend," Reuben beamed. "Our friend Petronella who we never forget, the lad who farms at Ingles-----"

"And us two," Dickie shouted. "And us, Reuben. And Mackie who is sore wounded."

Miranda laughed and took first Peter's hand and then Jenny's. "Well, my pretties! We're well met for only this morning I looked in the teacup and said that we should meet old friends today."

Then the two men came over to speak to the gypsies. Mr. Morton had met them before and liked and respected them, but Mr. Harman was rather bewildered and was sure that his wife would disapprove of gypsies. It was Peter who remembered Nicholas still sitting in Boy Blue and sent Mary to fetch him.

"This is Nicholas Whiteflower, a new friend of ours," Peter explained and noticed a quick glance pass between the husband and wife. "The Manor, where Nicholas used to live, is being knocked down and we're going to camp down there by the river for a few days."

Miranda's smile faded and then, when she saw that the three men were strolling up the road together and that David and Tom were fussing the horse, she took Peter's arm and led her back to the shadows at the top of the hill.

"Listen, Petronella. I do not know how well you know that boy and why you are going to camp near the Manor. I would only say this to you all. We do not like the gorge and would never camp there, nor near the river, which is dangerous when the rains come."

"But why, Miranda? Why don't you like it? We have heard some stories about it - one, a very sad one, about a woman called Harriet Brown who was drowned there. I'm afraid I can't tell you exactly why we're going there except that it is to help Nicholas. It's not only my secret, you see, Miranda, but of course we'll be careful of the river. We've seen it once and I know it's swift and deep in the gorge. Why wouldn't you camp there? You're not afraid of ghosts, are you?"

Miranda did not smile.

"Perhaps we are, my dear... I ask you all to take care, and make your camp away from the river and the gorge if you can... The men are coming back and we must go. We shall be back this way soon for we have a promise of harvest work at Bringewood Chase, and now we go on to help on a farm near Ludlow. We will look for you... Have you still the whistle we Romanies gave you when we first met?"

Peter laughed and flushed with pleasure. When she had saved Fenella's life by stopping the runaway caravan, Reuben and Miranda had given her a tiny, carved wooden whistle with the promise that if ever she was in trouble and a true Romany was in hearing, he would come to her help when she blew it. Peter had never had occasion to call the gypsies, but she had often tried the whistle when alone and wondered what magic there was in its thin, clear, piercing note.

"Of course I've got it. I'm not supposed to wear anything like that at school, but I always wear it at home and when we go on an adventure. Here it is," and she pulled at a thin silver chain round her neck and showed the gypsy the little whistle.

"Good!" Miranda smiled. "I am glad. Take care, Petronella, and I believe we shall meet again soon."

When they got back to the caravan, Fenella was showing the inside of it to Nicholas and the twins, while David, Tom and Jenny were talking to Reuben. The former gave Peter a quick, questioning look as if to ask what they had been talking about, but she took no notice and whispered something to Miranda.

Then they said 'Good-bye' as Fenella climbed to the driving seat of the caravan and took the reins. Miranda went inside to see about dinner and Reuben touched his hat and took the horse's bridle as the van rumbled forward.

"Most astonishing," Mr. Harman remarked as they all stood in the middle of the road, waving. "I had no idea that gypsies could be so amiable. How long have you known them, Jenny?"

"Oh, Dad! I've told you about them before, lots of times. They're not ordinary gyppos. They're real Romanies, and once Miranda told my fortune. It was a lovely fortune and she said that I must learn not to be afraid. You do like them, don't you?"

Mr. Harman gave an embarrassed cough and put his hand on his daughter's shoulder.

"Of course, of course, my dear! Very amiable indeed, and I think you have learned now not to be afraid. Come along. We must be on our way."

A few minutes later the expedition turned out of the road down the rough track leading to the river, and the two cars pulled up on the grass where the Lone Piners had left their bicycles on their first visit.

"I'm sorry you can't take the car closer, sir," Nicholas explained to Mr. Morton. "One of the best things about our gorge is that cars can't get any nearer than this."

David looked with dismay at what was being unpacked and laid out on the grass. Then he shouted after the twins who were mounting their cycles which Tom had just lowered from the roof of the Mortons' car. "Hi, you

two! Just wait for us. There's plenty for you to carry and you've got to take your share."

They soon realized that even with the help of the two men it would not be possible to take all they had brought in one journey. They loaded what they could on to their bicycles, and Mr. Harman and Mr. Morton staggered in the rear with big cardboard cartons of stores. Neither had seen the gorge before and were very impressed.

"No bathing here," Mr. Morton said. "All right for Peter and David, I suppose, but not for you others who can't swim as well as they can. There's not much sun and the water looks cold... Where are you going to camp?"

"In a meadow the other side of the bridge, Dad," David explained. "That seems the best place as you'll see, and the river is shallow there, although the cliffs are still high on the far side of the stream... Sorry it's so far, but this is certainly a grand place, isn't it?"

"Nice enough while the sun shines, David. Keep well away from the river when it rains, because the water would rise quickly. Find the nearest telephone box if you're in trouble and ring through to Ingles or to Mr. Harman if you want help. Don't keep the twins here if it rains heavily and send a postcard to your mother when you can... That's a very curious bridge, David."

The site, Mr. Morton agreed, could not be bettered. There was plenty of room for four tents on a level, grassy patch between a screen of bushes and the river bank. They were hidden from anyone on the bow bridge and from the path on the far side of the meadow, but could be seen from the hillside and, of course, by anyone using the narrow track on the river bank.

When they went back for the second load, David left the twins and Mackie in charge and told them to unpack the tents.

The twins didn't say much while the others were away. They knew how to camp and while Dickie carefully unrolled the tents and ground-sheets Mary went to collect twigs and firewood. For a few moments she stood at the river's edge and watched two dragonflies hovering over the water. The sun

was hot and she was tempted to paddle. She slipped off her sandals, sat on the bank and dipped her feet in the sparkling water. About twenty yards behind her Dickie was whistling cheerfully and the others by now would probably be on their way back from the cars with the final load. Suddenly Mary felt uneasy. It was as if she was being watched. She looked across the river into the thick undergrowth between the bank and the cliff, which here was much farther from the river than at the bow bridge. She watched carefully but could see nothing suspicious. The dragonflies were still hovering, the water was still singing, and there was a haze of heat about the tree tops.

Mary shivered, swung her bare feet to the grass and looked to her right down the narrow path at the water's edge. At that moment a jay, screaming angrily, cluttered out of the copse into which the track disappeared about thirty paces away. Mary knew that something had scared the bird and that her feeling that she was being watched was justified. Although she knew that there was no real reason for being scared she picked up her sandals and ran barefoot back to her twin. As she ran she glanced down the track and was sure she saw a movement and a flash of bright colour in the bushes.

Dickie was squatting on his heels looking longingly at an unopened tin of corned beef.

"What's the matter with you, twin? Where's the firewood?"

Mary flopped down beside him, looked anxiously over her shoulder and then told him in a whisper what she had felt and what she had seen.

He didn't laugh. He'd often experienced the same feeling.

"Spies, Mary? Lurking in the undergrowth? Why should people want to spy on us?"

"P'raps somebody knows why we've come here, twin? Or p'raps somebody wants to know? What about those two men who wanted to buy the sofa and who were pulling up the floor in the house? Shall we tell the others when they come? I can hear them now."

"No. Not yet. Tom or somebody will try to be funny. Let's see what happens."

They didn't have to wait very long. As soon as the others had dumped their loads David suggested that they should put up the tents and tidy up before they had a meal.

"I want to see what's happening at the house," Nicholas said. "I haven't heard the drill, and if the men aren't working we might have a better chance of looking over it again. I didn't have a chance to show you everything the other day. Shall I go on my own and see what's happening? It won't take me long to put up my own tent."

David agreed. There were enough of them to get the other tents up so Nicholas ran off importantly, and a few minutes later they saw him climbing up the steep slope of the field. Then they were all so busy that they forgot about him until he returned at a very significant moment.

It was Tom who first noticed the woman standing about fifteen yards away between the camp and the river bank. She was handsome in a bold way. Her hair was dark and the big gold rings in her ears were like Miranda's. She was wearing a shabby red and white dress and Tom was sure that she had been listening to them for some little time.

"Hi, David," he said. "We've got a visitor and she's very interested in us."

The others looked up from their various jobs and the twins, who were tightening the guy ropes of their tent, looked at each other in quick understanding.

"There you are, Dickie," Mary whispered. "It was red I saw in the bushes. I bet she's been lurking a long time."

David crawled backwards out of the tent he was going to share with Tom, but before he could recover from his surprise the woman walked up to them.

"What are you lot supposed to be doing? You're trespassing. Who said you could camp here? You'd better pack up and clear out before you get into trouble. Who are you?"

She was older than they had first thought. They could see now that her skin was sallow and her black hair coarse and uncared-for. Her hands were work-worn and her voice suggested that this was her part of the country.

David found his voice just as the others all began to speak at once.

"We're doing no harm, here," he said hotly. "We shall clear up when we go. There are no cattle here and, anyway, may I ask whether you are the owner of this land? If you are not, we'll soon find out who is and get permission."

The woman scowled and then looked at each of them closely as if she wanted to remember their faces. She blinked when she took in the twins and blinked again when Mary stepped forward and said in her clear little voice,

"You've seen us before, haven't you? You've been spying on us for at least half an hour. I saw you lurking in the bushes... An' please don't look so angry else Mackie here will bite you."

"He's only working on three legs at present," Dickie added, "but he hates angry people... Stay here, Mackie. Sit!"

Macbeth sat - but obviously under protest. He sat and growled softly because he didn't like the stranger and knew that she didn't like him.

"You two keep quiet," she snapped, "and keep that dog off, else there'll be trouble. I'm going to report you to the farmer who owns this land, and if you've got any sense you'll go before he comes and turns you out."

"Who's this?" said a familiar voice behind them. "She's wrong, anyway. This land doesn't belong to a farmer."

None of them had seen or heard Nicholas come back. The stranger looked round at him, as he spoke, and Peter, who was watching her, was sure that

she recognized him. But Nicholas was obviously puzzled and said, "What's happening? What's all the row about?"

Peter spoke first. "It's all right, Nicky. We don't know who she is, but she's threatening us and says we're trespassing on a farmer's land and that there'll be trouble if we don't go."

"But that's not true," said Nicholas, quickly standing up for his friends. "I don't know who you are but my name is Nicholas Whiteflower and I used to live in the Manor. I know the Manor is sold now and it's being knocked down, but this meadow has always belonged to the house and I'm sure it hasn't been bought by a farmer. Anyway, we can't be turned off and we're doing no harm, so please go away and don't bother us."

"It'll be the worse for you all if you don't clear out," the woman muttered. "I'm warning you. This place isn't healthy, as you'll soon find out for yourselves." She turned, went back to the river, and then turned left along the bank towards the bow bridge.

"Nice work, Nicky," David said when she was out of earshot. "Ever seen her before?"

Nicholas shook his head. He was feeling rather pleased with himself, and most particularly because he had been of use to his new friends.

"No, I don't think so. Why was she here? Not many people know this place... But we did see a strange bike left up by the cars, didn't we? P'raps she's been down here a long time?"

Mary explained that she had been spying on them from the bushes, and then they forgot her while they had a quick picnic meal of bread and cheese and corned beef.

"Proper hot meal tonight, please," Peter said as she lay on her back and closed her eyes. "I'm feeling very lazy, but I s'pose we must go and explore. I don't seem to be as interested in diamonds as I was... Were the men working on the Manor, Nicky? I haven't heard the drills."

"I didn't go up close, but I saw three messing about. They're not working very hard and I'm sure we could get into the house without any of them seeing... There are three things I want to show you now that you've seen the gorge. I want you to see our big well first, and then we'll look at the house again, and then you must see the ruined cottage and watermill down there."

David agreed. Tom wondered whether they ought to leave a sentry but was out-voted, and so they set out with Macbeth towards the Manor.

On the steep slope of the meadow the grass was parched, brown and slippery. Instead of taking them straight up the track, Nicholas led them diagonally across the field. He waited for them on the brow of the hill, and then pointed to his right where the ground sloped down to a spinney. In a saucer-like hollow, perhaps fifty yards from the trees, was the circular wall of a big well crowned with a tiled roof.

"We don't know really when it was made," Nicholas explained. It's hundreds of years older than the Manor, though, and must have been sunk for the house which was here before ours. Come and look."

It was certainly the biggest well that any of them had ever seen and must have been at least six feet across. The parapet was built of blocks of limestone, too high for the twins to see over, and the tiled roof was supported by four stone pillars, two of which held the windlass. This was a massive affair with a long length of chain coiled round it. The big bucket, hanging from a hook, was of wood.

"How deep, Nicky?" David asked as he leaned over the parapet. "There's plenty of water down there and I can feel the cold of it from up here... Let the bucket down, Tom, and let's see what it tastes like."

"I can't remember how deep it is, David," Nicholas replied. "Aunt Margaret knows all about it, but could it be sixty feet? She told me once that the springs that feed the well have never dried up in the last hundred years. The bucket is too heavy for me to pull up by myself, but when you look down you can see the water must be very deep."

"Give me a stone, please," David demanded, and when Jenny had passed him a smooth, brown pebble he held his hand over the mouth of the well and let the stone fall. They seemed to wait a long time for the 'plop' which, when it came, echoed hollowly round the wall of the well.

Then Tom let down the bucket. The windlass squeaked and the chain clinked as it ran off the roller, and then the bucket hit the water with a smack. Tom was strong, but it was as much as he could do to pull it up. David grabbed the chain, steadied the bucket on the edge of the parapet and then lowered it to the ground. They had nothing to drink out of, so in turn they put their faces in the bucket and sucked. The water was sweet and so cold that it made their teeth ache.

"What I want to know is *why*?" Jenny said as she splashed Mackie. "Why make a great well like this here? It's a long way from the house, and the river with plenty of water is not far away. When they'd pulled the water up, somebody must have had to carry it for miles and miles to the house. Do you know why, Nicky? No, neither do I... Do *you* know, Tom? I don't suppose you do because this is the first time you've ever seen it, but it all seems rather mysterious to me."

"Me, too," Peter agreed. "It's such a big well in such a peculiar place. Is the river just beyond the trees, Nicky? We're on the other side of the gorge now, I s'pose."

Nicholas nodded. "That's right. The cliffs aren't as steep this side, but the trees and bushes are very thick and it's not easy to get down to the river. I haven't been down that way for ages... I don't know about the well but somebody told me once that there may have been some old cottages down here once... You don't think Harriet Brown would hide the necklace here, do you? There's plenty of water about."

"The last words on the last page were 'Where the water-----' Surely if she meant the well she would have said so more clearly," David replied.

"Trouble is, we don't know whether those words were the last she wrote, or whether there are some more sheets of paper somewhere. We shall have to come back here some time and explore properly. Let's look at the house now."

They heard the pneumatic drill before they breasted the hill and saw the Manor standing derelict in the sunshine.

"Does it look the same to you, Nicky?" Dickie asked. "We mean, have they bashed something down that we don't know about but you do? It looks just the same to me. They haven't even knocked that tower down."

"I don't know what they're supposed to be doing," Nicholas admitted. "They're certainly not working very hard. I can't see anybody watching us, so shall we nip in the front door and explore the rest of the house?"

"I don't really know what we expect to find," David admitted, "but as there doesn't seem to be anybody about let's chance it and have a look round."

They didn't find any other clue in the housekeeper's room. The smashed floorboards had not been replaced and the marble mantelpiece had been wrenched out. In three other rooms - one of which Nicholas said might have been the housekeeper's bedroom - there were signs of deliberate damage, but of course they did not know whether or not the searchers in the house had found what they were looking for. On the ground floor they realized that the demolition men were working on the kitchens at the back of the house. As they stood in the vast, empty hall Jenny whispered, "What about the cellars, Nicky? I'm absolutely *terrified* in cellars. Does slimy water drip down the walls of your cellars?... Oh! What *have* I said? Do you think poor Harriet wanted to say it was hidden where the water dripped down the walls?"

Before any of them could answer a shadow in the doorway made David look up. The foreman - the thin, dark man in the beret - was standing in the porch. He must have heard all that Jenny had said and he was certainly very, very angry. They weren't altogether surprised when, for the second time within a few hours, they were accused of trespassing.

"Get out," he snapped. "Get out and stop out. If I, or any of my men, see you here again you'll be reported to the police. House-breaking is dangerous and I'm responsible while this house is coming down. And don't argue. Just get out and take that dog with you. Just remember what I say!"

Mackie barked and Mary laughed.

"We don't want to stay in your silly old house," she said - and then realizing that perhaps she wasn't being very polite to Nicholas, she added hastily. "Of course, it wasn't silly when Nicholas lived in it. We're not going to run away with it, so don't you worry."

"And with all respect," Dickie added proudly, 'don't you be rude to us. We're the only people who can be rude to us, if you know what I mean."

"You know perfectly well that we're not doing any harm," David said as he pushed Dickie aside. "We told you when we came before that Nicholas Whiteflower used to live in the Manor. He just wants to show us round. Did you know that two strange men were here the other day bashing the place up? We saw them. We were wondering whether we ought to tell you or the police? You can be sure that they were doing much more harm than we were."

The man's eyes narrowed.

"Now look here," he began more quietly, "I don't want no trouble - specially in front of the young ladies - but you've got to get out and stay out. I don't want any of you to get hurt-----"

Tom, who had been getting angrier and angrier, suddenly exploded into words. "Get hurt? Who's going to hurt us? Not you, mister, and don't you try it on. You two girls go ahead with the twins and Mackie, please. Just wait for us at the top of the hill."

Peter laughed, grabbed Mary's hand and then led the way out into the sunshine. Jenny, Dickie and Macbeth followed reluctantly. Nicholas stood uneasily between the two older boys.

"Don't you believe me about the two men?" David went on. "They were pulling up the floorboards of an upstairs room. But I suppose you did know?"

The foreman looked them up and down for a few seconds.

"There have been no strange men in the house, and if anybody has been smashing the place up it's you and your gang... Now get out and don't let me, or any of my men, see you here again. And don't forget." And then, to their surprise, he walked out and left them in the hall.

"He's a liar," David said tersely. "And not a very good one, either. He's as nasty a customer as the other two, and I think they've bribed him to keep quiet and to keep us out. There's something odd going on in this house, isn't there?"

Nicholas nodded and then Tom grunted his agreement.

"The girls are waiting for us, but you've got something else to show us, haven't you, Nicky? An old mill. Hope those two nasty characters aren't hiding there now."

"They wouldn't like to," Nicholas said. "The mill and the cottage are nearly falling down. I can't ever remember anybody living in them. They're very old."

As they stepped out into the sunshine, the foreman was disappearing round the corner of the house towards the sound of the drill.

"I don't like that bloke," Tom said. "I wouldn't mind having a row with him, but it seems to me that all sorts of funny things are happening round here. We started something, Jen, when we went to Ludlow with your dad and found the letter. You got a copy of it, David?"

David felt the wallet in his pocket and nodded.

"Take care of it, then," Tom said grimly. "Maybe we ought to hide it or post it back home or burn it."

They all looked at him in surprise because he wasn't usually so serious.

"Another thing," he went on. "Who was that woman with the earrings? Everybody keeps on telling us to get out and I don't like it."

"We'll talk it over round the camp fire tonight," Jenny said eagerly. "That's what we'll do. Now show us the haunted mill, Nicky."

Nicholas led them through their camp, which had not been disturbed, to the track along the river bank and then turned to the right. The river narrowed and ran faster here over its rocky bed. Under the overhanging trees it was very gloomy and soon it was difficult for them to be heard above the roaring of the water.

"Rapids on the Amazon!" Nicholas yelled, pointing at the foaming torrent. "Super! Follow me now," and he ducked under an overhanging branch and halted at the edge of a brick-lined ditch. "If we could lift the sluice on the river bank the water would rush down here and try to turn the mill wheel. I can't move it, but p'raps we all could? The mill is just round the corner. Follow me."

A howl of anguish came from Mary.

"Horrible, foul, beastly, poisonous nettles! I'm stung all over. I hate your mill, Nicky."

Nicholas laughed as he jumped over the ditch. The others, except Macbeth, followed, and the twins made Tom go back and lift their wounded hero over.

Both the mill and the adjoining cottage looked derelict and forgotten. Tiles had begun to slide from their rotting roofs, what once had been a garden in front of the cottage was now a wilderness but, oddly enough, somebody had boarded up the glassless windows and the doors so that it would not be easy to get inside. The gaunt framework of the mill wheel in its pit looked rather pathetic, but there was something particularly eerie about these ruins which once had been a happy home and a place for honest work. The thought of them just crumbling away without anyone caring was hateful. It would not have been so bad if the undergrowth could have been checked. The nettles were as high as the ground floor windows, and golden rod, planted years ago by the miller or his wife in their little patch of garden, was growing almost as tall as bamboos in a jungle. The branches of a tree had grown against the walls of the cottage, and although the sun was shining strongly

the atmosphere here, under the trees, and close to the rushing water, was chill and dank.

Nicholas seemed disappointed. "I thought you'd all be thrilled with this," he said at last. "I haven't been down here for ages, but there were always bats in there and rats, too."

"What fun," Peter said in rather a small voice. "I've got an idea. Let's all go back to camp now and have a good meal and an early night. We're all tired and we've got a lot to talk about, and we can't break into these horrible places now even if we wanted to... And don't think we're not thrilled about all this, Nicky. We are, and you've given us a wonderful afternoon, but we can't do everything at once."

So they went back to camp, lit a fire and made one meal of tea and supper just as the sun went down behind the cliffs of the gorge. Long before the meal was over the twins were struggling to keep awake and made no objection when Peter suggested that they should turn in. Nicholas went next to his single tent, and they were all surprised at the efficient way in which he managed it. He was certainly proving a pleasant and enterprising companion and was almost embarrassingly anxious to make up for his previous behaviour.

Then the two girls went off to collect more wood for the fire and when they came back Jenny said that she couldn't stay awake any longer.

"I'll come soon," Peter said. "I'm not sleepy now and I won't disturb you. I can slip into my sleeping bag without you knowing anything about it."

David, Peter and Tom talked quietly for nearly an hour. They went over everything from the beginning, understanding now that the two men Tom and Jenny had first seen in the sale room had some knowledge of the Whiteflower diamonds and were searching desperately for them. They could not place the woman who had tried to frighten them away, and were not sure about the foreman. Peter was particularly worried by the idea that Harriet might have hidden the necklace in the old mill or the cottage.

"We must find out from Miss Whiteflower whether the mill was working when the necklace was stolen. "*Where the water*" sort of fits it, doesn't it? I must say I hate the idea of searching those ruins. Nicholas doesn't seem to mind, though. P'raps we can leave it to him? Tell you what, David. Just read the copy of the letter over to us again and see if we've missed anything. Here's my torch."

Mackie, curled up by the fire, stirred and grunted as she stumbled against him. It was dark now. There was no moon yet but the stars were bright. The fire was dying, and as David took the copy of the letter from his wallet and began to read to them by the light of the torch, Mackie sat up and pricked his ears.

Neither Peter nor Tom interrupted as David read the words poor Harriet Brown had written on the last tragic day of her life, but just as he reached the important words, 'where the water', Macbeth barked warningly and dashed off into the darkness towards the river bank. David, with the torch, was after him in a flash, but Tom tripped over one of the tent pegs and Peter fell with him.

Now the night was pandemonium. Somewhere not far away Mackie was growling and barking. Someone was cursing, too, and then Mackie yelped in pain and there followed a prodigious noise of somebody blundering through undergrowth. Peter heard David say, "Good boy, Mackie. Well done," and ran to meet him.

They met at the river's bank. Tom came pounding up behind them and then David gasped, "Here's the torch, Peter. Shine it on Mackie. I think he was kicked else he would have gone after the chap. Can you see? I've picked him up."

Peter took the torch from David's hand and pressed the button. Mackie was struggling to free himself. His ears were cocked, his tail was wagging, and between his firmly clenched teeth was a piece of reddish-brown tweed.

7. The Tower

In spite of the night's disturbances all the Lone Piners woke early the next morning. Tom was the first. As soon as he realized where he was, he unzipped his sleeping bag and looked at the watch on his wrist. Ten past six. David, beside him, was still asleep, and at the foot of his sleeping bag Macbeth the hero stirred and wagged his tail gently as Tom crawled out of the tent.

The grass was wet with dew. Wreaths of ghostly mist, promising another hot day, still hung round the bushes by the river's edge and softened the outline of the trees and the cliffs on the opposite bank. No bird sang. Only the murmur of the water broke the silence. Tom looked round but nobody else was moving. He wondered what Jenny would say when she was told that she had slept through last night's excitement? Then he pulled his knapsack out of the tent, found his bathing trunks and towel and ran down to the river. At no place this side of the bridge was the water deep enough for a swim, but he found a pool between two smooth rocks where he was covered if he lay full length. He gasped as the cold water from the Welsh hills flowed over him. Then he closed his eyes and thought about last night's encounter. He turned over, put his face under the water and decided to go back and wake David and discuss what had happened more seriously than they had been able to do last night. Then Macbeth, who was sitting on the bank watching him, barked a welcome and Tom scrambled to his knees and saw Peter and Jenny running towards them. They were dressed but carrying towels and sponge bags.

He splashed to the bank and sat down beside them as they got out their tooth-brushes.

Tom!" Jenny gasped excitedly. "Tom! Peter has just told me about your adventure last night. I shall never, never forgive any of you for not waking me up. Do you think we're being utterly surrounded with spies and watched all the time? Who was the man, Tom, and why was he lurking like that?"

"We'll have to talk it out," Tom said cheerfully. "Let's eat first. The twins don't know yet, so it will be a noisier breakfast than usual... Make yourself nice clean girls."

David was stirring when Tom got back to the camp so he pulled him feet first out of the tent. Then he went to wake the twins and pulled their bags out into the sunshine and left them struggling to get out. Their noise soon woke Nicholas.

The Lone Piners were used to camping and by half past seven they were all washed and dressed and enjoying breakfast of hot sausages, fried bread, rolls and marmalade and pints of tea. While they munched, Peter told the twins, Jenny and Nicholas what had happened last night.

"The real hero was Mackie," she finished. "He really is the bravest dog. He heard this man prowling about in the bushes and dashed after him. We were talking and didn't hear anything till Mackie went in to battle. I'm sure the man kicked him because we heard him yelp, but he seems all right this morning."

Mary dropped her sausage and ran across to Macbeth, who was sitting with ears cocked, snapping at a wasp. She crooned over him and felt him tenderly. He whined when she touched his ribs.

"He's saved our lives again," she said, as he licked her nose. "An' I hope you big ones will just jolly well remember all the times you've tried to make us leave him behind..."

"And specially David," Dickie interrupted. "Just you remember all the places you won't let us take him to, if you know what I mean."

"I know, Dickie," his brother laughed. "We're beginning to learn your language. We all agree about Mackie and we'll give him a medal at Christmas... Now we've got to be serious because the man Mackie drove off last night-----"

"How do you know it was a man?" Nicholas asked.

"We do know. I'll show you a clue in a sec. The trouble is that the spy heard me reading the letter and he must have heard the last sentence about 'where the water', although I can't remember whether we actually talked about the letter, can you, Peter?"

"I think you did. What we can't be sure of is how long the enemy was hiding there listening to us. Show them the clue, David."

They crowded round as David opened his wallet and took out a little triangle of brown tweed.

"I bet that's from the edge of the chap's trousers," Tom said. "And I know who wears trousers of that ghastly colour. You remember, don't you, Jen?"

"It's the man with the specs. The tall, thin old man who tried to buy the sofa at the sale and then bought the chairs. You remember him, don't you, Nicky?"

"Course I do. The same man who was tearing up the floorboards in the housekeeper's room. Nobody could forget a suit like that."

"Think, Nicky," David said. "Try and remember whether you've ever seen that chap before. Or the man who was with him - the younger, pasty-faced man?"

"Pudding Face," Dickie said. "That's what we call him. We don't like Pudding Face."

"I'm sure I've never seen him before in my life," Nicky said. "Can't be so certain about Dickie's Pudding Face, but I'm sure I'd remember the old chap if I'd seen him before. He came into the sale rooms at Ludlow."

"But don't you all see?" Jenny squeaked. "Don't you all see that somebody else is after our treasure? I mean, it's almost as if somebody knew that poor Harriet's letter was hidden in the sofa, and yet the only thing she tells us is that the diamonds are hidden near the water, and yet these men were smashing up Harriet's room."

"They hadn't heard David reading the letter then," Peter said quietly. "They are beginning to realize now that we know something that they don't, and if I were you, David, I'd burn the copy of the letter at once. We all know now what it said. Burn it, David. I don't like those two men. Anybody who would take the trouble to creep about round this camp listening to us talking at half past ten at night means business."

Jenny nodded so hard that her pony tail wobbled.

"Oh, yes, of course they do. They're all terrifically sinister, but none of you has asked about the mysterious woman who was spying on the twins. Who's she?"

Nobody knew, and then Tom, who had not spoken for some minutes, said, "We may as well face it and realize that some people are trying hard to get us out of here. Even Miranda and Reuben kept on trying to put us off."

"That was different," Peter said quickly. "They're superstitious. They just don't like the gorge."

"Don't like it much myself," Jenny agreed. "It's creepy, even in daytime... What Tom says is right. Somebody - lots of people maybe, p'raps a gang? - is trying to get us out and we ought to post sentries all the time. I don't think any of us ought to be left alone here."

"Neither do I," Tom said quickly. "Burn the copy of the letter now, David. Your aunt has got the real one, hasn't she, Nicky?"

Nicholas nodded. Never in his wildest dreams had anything like this ever happened to him and he was too excited to speak.

David took the copy of the letter from his wallet, looked round carefully and dropped it on the embers of their camp fire. The paper crinkled, scorched, and then burst into flame as Jenny, with her hands clasped round her knees, sighed rapturously.

"I've read lots of books where they burn documents. The words on that one will be for ever engraved on our hearts, won't they?" she whispered, and

then giggled when she saw that the others were laughing at her.

Then David turned to the twins.

"Would you two like to act as sentries on the bridge?" he suggested. "We'll tidy up here and decide what to do this morning, and I promise we'll do nothing without letting you know. If you see anybody coming along the path by the river or over the hill from the house, give the peewit's warning whistle and then one of you can run back to us as a messenger. We'll join you in about half an hour and sentries don't have to wash up."

Dickie agreed instantly to this plan and the two went off cheerfully to the bridge, leaving Mackie licking his bruised ribs by the fire.

"We must try and put ourselves in the place of Harriet Brown," David said when they'd gone. "We shall have to explore every inch of the gorge and all the land round the Manor, and we'd better go in pairs as we've got to work quickly."

Before any of them could answer, Mackie sat up and cocked his ears. Suddenly they heard the peewit's whistle from the direction of the bridge. As the dog growled and raced up the track towards the river they heard a faint cry of, "David! Help!"

Without a word they all raced to the rescue with David and Peter in the lead and Nicholas panting behind. Below the bridge, on the grassy verge of the river, they saw Dickie struggling in the grip of the pale-faced Blandish, who had screwed the little boy's arm behind his back. The man's bicycle was on the ground and Mary, trying ineffectually to rescue her twin, was managing to keep just out of the bully's reach.



Without a word they all raced to the rescue.

Tom pushed Peter behind him as he came up with David. Tom's friends knew that he had a hot temper but none of them had ever seen him so angry as he shouted,

"Let the kid go, you dirty great bully. Let him go."

David pushed the fallen bicycle out of the way with his foot.

"Let him go, and then tell us what he's done to deserve that," he said quietly, and then Mackie, whom they had all forgotten, came up the path on his three sound legs. As soon as he saw the twins and an enemy he went into battle. The man released Dickie and tried to kick the dog, but Macbeth was beginning to realize that his enemies always did try to kick him. Kicks were painful and he was getting wary. He dodged the kick and as Dickie ran over to Mary, Macbeth the hero dashed in and bit the man's other ankle.

With a roar of rage Blandish lunged towards him and tripped over the fallen bicycle. A bicycle is an awkward thing when lying on the ground. One of the pedals sticks up and a pedal is a very painful thing to fall on. When Blandish fell on his pedal he howled with surprise and fury - and then he swore.

"Shut up," David said, and was surprised that the man did. As he unseated himself from the bicycle and tottered to his feet, Macbeth attacked him again. He went down on his front legs and, forgetting all about his honourable wounds, he pranced round his victim, growling fiercely.

Blandish rubbed his shin and stepped back. Macbeth advanced and so did the Lone Piners, for they already sensed what was going to happen. Macbeth made another little sortie and again Blandish swore and kicked out at him. He missed and retreated another step. Macbeth, with wildly wagging tail, pranced proudly forward and the man fell backwards into the river. If the water, at that spot, had not been about two feet deep he might have hurt himself for he was a heavy man and the bank was quite high

where the water, swirling under the narrow bridge, had worn it away. As it was, the water broke his fall but the splash he made was prodigious.

They stood on the bank and watched him wallowing like a clumsy hippopotamus, blowing river water from his mouth. He staggered to his feet, lost his balance on a slippery rock and fell in again.

"Why was he doing that to you, Dickie?" David asked quietly. "Were you being cheeky?"

"Yes. I was a bit. Mary was down on the bank and I was watching her from the bridge when old Pudding Face came up quietly on his bike and grabbed at me and told me to clear out. Then he pulled me down here and twisted my arm and asked me all sorts of questions about us an' then-----"

"An' then I did the danger call," his twin went on. "An' I shouted for help... Oh, look! He's fallen in again! Let's get him out before he poisons all the fishes."

A long silence followed this insult. Then Blandish got slowly to his feet again and as the water swirled past his knees and ran out of his sleeves he stared at them all with hatred blazing from his eyes. Jenny and Nicholas backed away, expecting a string of curses, but when Blandish spoke his words were quiet and much more frightening.

"You will all be very sorry for this. Very, very sorry. You've been told to clear out of here but you can't seem to understand plain English. Now listen to me. You're trespassing and you'll go right back to your camp, pack up and clear out. You're not wanted here and from now on it's going to be dangerous for you to stay. I don't like messing about with kids and girls, but this place isn't going to be healthy for any of you any more. Get some sense into your thick heads and clear out so as there's no more trouble."

"We're not trespassing, and we're not doing any harm to anybody by camping down here," David said. "Why were you bullying my brother? Even if you happen to be so misguided-----" he was proud of that phrase - "as to believe that we are trespassing, why take it out of a small boy?"

Dickie was now hopping about with excitement. He liked being rescued!

"I'll tell you what Pudding Face did. He asked me why we had come and how long ago, and who we were and he asked specially about Nicholas and all the time he was screwing my arm which is quite broken-----"

Tom glanced at Dickie and silenced him and then stepped forward beside David on the edge of the river's bank. They were both able to look down at Blandish, still standing in the water. He was not a pleasant sight.

"We're not going from here until we know why you're so keen for us to go. You can't turn us out. Some of us have seen you before. You were at the furniture sale at Ludlow and wanted something somebody else had bought."

"And you were pulling up floorboards in the Manor," Nicholas added. "I ought to know you but I don't."

"But I know you, you little white-faced rat," Blandish snarled as he hauled himself up the bank. "Better get your fine friends to take you away with them. Ask them to give you a home. You couldn't keep this one."

Nicholas flushed and stood back as Peter gripped his hand. In silence, Blandish squelched between them, picked up his bicycle and pushed it towards the bridge. Then he turned and almost spat at them, "Get out and stay out."

They stood and watched him push his cycle up the slope of the bridge. Then he mounted, and Mary, who had been holding Macbeth, let the dog go and said, "After him, boy. Seek him out," and like a black bullet Mackie raced after his enemy again. Even with his wounded leg he caught him on the path on the other side of the bridge. Blandish lashed out at him with his foot, the bicycle wobbled and ran into a bush at the side of the track. He fell off and, with what they imagined to be dreadful curses, disentangled himself from his machine and rushed at the dog. Macbeth barked defiantly and then trotted back to the others, smug in the satisfaction of a job well done.

They made a fuss of him and then Tom said, "If there really is a treasure to be found, I reckon we'd better find it quickly. There are some nasty types round here and they mean business."

"P'raps they do," Peter said hotly. "You're not suggesting that we give up our camp, are you, Tom? That's not like you."

"'Course I'm not. Be your age, Peter. I'm just saying that if we want to help Nicholas and Miss Whiteflower we'd better hurry and we'd better be very careful, too. These two men are dangerous and I don't think they'd care what they did to get this treasure. We've got to use our heads, and these kids ought not to go about by themselves and I'm not sure whether we should ever leave the camp unguarded. What do you think, David?"

They sat on the river bank and held a council of war. Jenny had never been so passionately interested in an adventure and time and time again she begged them to try and put themselves in the place of Harriet Brown.

"If we could only imagine what she felt like," she pleaded. "If we knew that, it would help us to know what she did after she wrote that letter. Do you think she knew where she was going to hide the necklace when she was writing it? Trouble is there's so much water round here. There's the mill wheel, the old well, the water in the house and-----"

"And the water under the bridge there and through the gorge and running over the pebbles here," Peter interrupted. "And there may have been the water crossing the river by the aqueduct. Where is there some more water, Nicky? You should know."

"It's a watery sort of place," Nicholas admitted. "There are some little streams coming out of the cliffs but not many. I've been wondering whether we ought to have asked Aunt Margaret more about Harriet Brown? I know what Jenny means about finding out more about her, and I s'pose we all ought to be very sorry for her because she was drowned but, after all, she was a thief. She stole the necklace."

"I'm sure she was *absolutely forced* to do it for the man she was writing to," Jenny said hotly. "I expect she was passionately in love with him, and when

she realized what she had done and that her lover had deserted her and that the police were suspicious of her she drowned herself... I think it's all terribly, terribly tragic and sad," she sniffed.

Then David took control before the twins tried to do so. "Tom's right," he said. "There's no time to waste. I suppose it would be safer if we all stuck together but that will waste too much time. We'll have three search parties all exploring different places at the same time and we'll meet at the camp in time for supper."

"When's that?" Dickie asked quickly. "And who's in our party? We don't want Tom, frinstance. He hates us. But when is supper? You can't expect us to go trailing all over the place for hours and hours without sustenance. We can't trail people or find necklaces on empty stummicks."

"The twins, Nicholas and Mackie had better stick together and explore the house and garden. Peter and Jenny can do the meadow here, keep an eye on the camp and also try and get into the ruins of the cottage and the mill. Then I thought that Tom and I had better do the gorge, particularly the cliffs on each side of it. There'll be a lot of climbing up and down to do there and didn't Nicky say that there are some caves?"

Nicholas nodded. "A few. But they're very small. Shall we start at once, twins? I've got an idea about the house."

"We'll start when we've got our rations," Mary said. "We simply gotta eat sometime."

So they went back to the camp and made some thick sandwiches. David and Tom noticed that Peter and Jenny both seemed rather quiet and guessed that neither were too pleased about being in the same search party. David had a special reason, however, for keeping Tom with him. He knew that he was a good climber and knew, too, that the exploration of the gorge was the most difficult of the three jobs and would take the longest.

Nicholas and the twins were ready first.

"So long, pards," Dickie said out of the side of his mouth. "S'long. Jus' wait around for us and you'll be O.K. We'll be bringin' back the loot afore you others have got the camp fire burning at sundown... S'long, pards," and he slouched out of camp swinging his hips as if he had a pair of six-shooters banging against them.

Nicholas, and Mary with Macbeth, followed him, and as soon as they were out of sight of the camp the former said,

"Look here, you two! I've got a good idea. We've a better chance of spying and exploring than any of the others, only our trouble will be to get into the house without being noticed. Come over here and I'll show you something."

He led them back a few yards to the river bank and pointed up to the top of the hill beyond which lay the Manor.

"See there. Look carefully. It's like the top of a big chimney. Can you see it? Just above the top of the hill."

"But there's nothing there," Mary complained. "We've been up to the top of that hill."

"I'll tell you what it is," Nicholas said excitedly. "It's the top of that stupid old tower on the Manor. I haven't been up it for ages but I remember now that it's the most wonderful look-out place. It's got a sort of wall, like battlements, round the top and a lead roof and a flagpole. Nobody could see us up there but we can see everything - the grounds, part of the house, the well, the gorge and even down into our camp here... At least, I think we should be able to see the camp because I remember you can see the river below the bridge."

For a few minutes Dickie seemed a little peevish. Perhaps this was because he was used to being the leader when having an adventure with his twin.

"Not much use spending the afternoon up there," he muttered. "Don't suppose we shall see the diamonds from that height," but when Mary laughed at him he managed a faint grin in return.

Nicholas led the way up the hillside and they crawled the last few yards on their hands and knees until they could look down on the Manor. The drills were working again and a haze of dust over the far corner of the house suggested that the men were still at work on the kitchen quarters. The front door was open and smoke was coming from the little chimney of the hut on the drive.

"There's nobody there now," Mary whispered. "Why don't we just run down and dash in the front door and search and search until we find the secret passage leading to the mysterious tower and then climb wearily up the winding stair an'-----"

"An' fall down dead with erzaustchun I should think," Dickie interrupted. "There is somebody in the hut and I should think it's that foreman chap with the dirty beret making himself a nice cup of tea. He doesn't like us so how are we going to get in without him noticing?"

Nicholas' voice was shaking with excitement as he whispered details of his plan.

"If it's only one man in the hut, and I expect Dickie is right about that, then I'll go down and see while you stay here. I reckon I can run faster than he can. I'll be very rude to him and make him so mad he'll chase me. I'll lead him round the back of the house and as soon as we're out of sight you two run in the front door."

Mary looked at him admiringly.

"You're very brave, Nicky. Are you sure you can run fast enough? Do you think you ought to take Mackie? And how do we know the way to the secret tower, and how do we get up and when will you come and how will you find your way when you've managed to dodge our enemy?"

"I'll deal with him," Nicholas boasted. "I can dodge him at the back of the house by the stables, or maybe I'll run over towards the gorge and hide in the bushes. He'll never catch me. It's your job to get into the house as quickly as you can without being seen. Go down the hall past the stairs and there you'll see a green door leading into a stone passage. The last door on

the left along the passage leads into a sort of store-room and in the corner of that room is a little door. The key to that door used to hang on a hook in the wall. It's a small key but if it's not there and the latch won't work you'll just have to stay in that room till I come. Open the door if you can, and go right up the stone steps to the top, where there's a trapdoor. I hope you'll be tall enough to unbolt it and go out on to the roof. I believe there used to be a pair of wooden steps kept on the top landing. I should keep Mackie on the lead and don't let him bark... Now let's hurry before the other men come round for their tea."

"We'll come with you as far as the hut and hide behind it," Dickie suggested. "Mackie won't make a noise. Soon as you've got that chap out of the way we'll dash into the house, but don't take too long, Nicky."

Nicholas whispered, "Cheerio. I'll be with you soon as I can," and ran forward, keeping well to the right of the hut. The twins, with Macbeth on a short leash between them, raced after him and flung themselves on the grass behind the hut just as the foreman, hearing Nicholas' steps on the gravel of the drive, came out to see what was happening.

Nicholas stopped about twenty paces away and glared at the man as he shouted, "I've told you before to keep away. You're trespassing. Get out!"

"Don't fuss," the boy replied. "And don't speak to me like that either. I'm going to have another look round the house before you smash it up and you can't stop me. Just get on with your tea and don't bother me."

Crouched behind the hut the twins pummelled each other with silent joy. Nicholas was wonderful! They could see him easily, but he never even glanced in their direction. Although they could not see the foreman they could hear him puffing with rage and muttering what they guessed to be the most frightful curses. Then he moved forward into their sight and roared, "So I've got to throw you out, have I? Saucy young devil. Come here!"

It was easy for Nicholas. As Dickie crawled forward to the corner of the hut to get a better view their new friend saw him and half raised his hand in recognition. Then the man charged forward and Nicholas turned and ran. At first he didn't run too fast and to the twins' horror the angry man gained on

him. Then Nicholas looked back over his shoulder and spurred down the drive and drew away. His pursuer was wasting his breath by shouting and, in a few seconds, they both disappeared round the far corner of the house.

As the twins dashed across the drive and into the house they realized that the noise of the drills had stopped. They were only just in time, for as they ran through the hall dragging a furious little dog behind them, two men crossed the sunlit drive and went into the hut. The twins did not wait to hear what the workmen said when they realized that their boss was not there. Dickie pushed open the green baize door which swung silently back behind them.

"Stitch, Dickie!" Mary gasped. "Ghastly, torturing stitch. I must rest for a sec. Have you got one, too? Wasn't Nicky brave?"

Her twin leaned against the whitewashed wall of the passage. He was getting rather fed up with Nicholas and with Mary's adulation of him.

"I have *not* got a stitch, thank you," he said coldly. "Not even although I am your twin. I don't like this passage so let's get out of it and find the tower. Did he say the last door on the left?"

Mary looked at him reproachfully and followed him into the room at the end of the passage. This room was also stone flagged. The pale distemper was peeling from the walls and the window of frosted glass was barred. Although the sun was hot outside, here in the deserted house the atmosphere was dank and chill.

Mary picked up Macbeth and leaned against the closed door.

"I don't like this place, twin. There's the door. Look for the key."

Dickie reached up to a hook in the wall, removed a small key and unlocked a narrow door.

"Just look at this, twin! It's terrific. A winding staircase. It's just like he said."

"Of course it is. Nicholas is very brave and rather marvellous... You're jolly selfish because you've forgotten all about him being chased all round the house by that disgustin' man in the beret... Anyway, let's climb up and leave the door open for him just in case he's pursued by his enemies right into the house."

Dickie nodded and stepped into the turret. Mary, with Macbeth still in her arms, followed him and left the door an inch ajar. The air was fresh and there was just enough light for them to see the sharp curve of the stairway and an iron handrail on the left.

Dickie began to climb. The steps were of stone and not at all worn, and what little light there was came through the slits in the brickwork of the outside wall.

"Like the slits they used to shoot arrows through," Mary whispered. "I wish we could see out but the wall is covered with creeper. Don't be silly, Mackie darling. You can walk upstairs perfectly well. I can't carry you for ever."

Macbeth was hating this expedition. It didn't make sense to him. He knew that the man in the beret was an enemy, but had not been allowed to attack him. Then he had been kept on a short lead which was an insult, then carried where an independent dog was capable of walking and now made to walk up steep stairs which were narrower on one side than the other and tired his legs.

The twins' legs began to ache, too, as they struggled upwards, hoping that after each turn to the right they would see the trapdoor which Nicholas had told them about. They reached a little landing at last but there were no wooden steps, and when Dickie reached up for the bolt of the trapdoor it was too high for him.

"It's ridickerlous," he muttered in a choky sort of voice. "Jus' because we're not tall enough yet. I'll bend down, twin, and you'll have to climb on my back and pull the bolt... Go on. Your sandals won't hurt me."

They had used this method before and Mary managed to draw the bolt after a struggle. Dickie raised himself a little while she pushed up the door until

the hot sunshine poured down on them and Mackie barked excitedly.

"Hang on to the edge now and I'll shove you up," Dickie gasped. For a moment Mary hung suspended and then her twin grasped her ankles and pushed her up until she was able to scramble on to the lead roof.

"It's super, twin!" she squealed excitedly. "I can see for a million miles just like Nicky said. Pass Mackie up now."

Dickie held the protesting little dog above his head and Mary grabbed him and hauled him up beside her.

"You've been very clever," Dickie complained plaintively. "But how do I get up? If you try and haul me up I shall pull you down. Didn't Nicky say there was a flagpole? If there is there ought to be some rope."

There was, so Mary doubled a length round the base of the flagpole and let the ends down to her twin. In ten seconds he was beside her.

The roof of the tower was about eight feet across and the imitation castellated battlements of red brick three feet high. The view, as Nicholas had promised them, was remarkable. From one side they could see through the trees the gleam of water in the gorge. The bow bridge looked like a toy and the river winding through the meadow like a length of silver ribbon. They could see the distant trees hiding the ruined cottage and mill, and in a little clearing by the river the tents of their camp looked like models. Directly below them and to their right were the sloping roofs of the house which hid the drive and the workmen's hut.

There were footsteps on the stone stairs and soon they heard the climber's laboured breathing. Mary opened her mouth to call to Nicholas, but Dickie checked her. He wanted to be sure.

It was Nicholas. His face, usually so pale, was pink and shining with perspiration. He smiled when he saw them, but had no breath to answer when Dickie whispered hoarsely, "You O.K., Nicky? Did you dodge him? Do they know you're safe in the house?"

He shook his head. Then after a long pause, he gasped, "Did you pull the steps up after you? Pass them down and I'll come up."

"There weren't any steps," Mary protested. "We had to do gym to get up here, but we've got some rope. Here you are. Can you haul yourself up on that?"

They had to help him and as soon as he was up he lay flat on the hot roof until he had fully recovered his breath.

"I know there used to be a little pair of wooden steps kept on the landing," he said at last. "Wonder who's had those? Any signs of anybody up here? Cigarette ends, f'rinstance?"

"No, there aren't," Dickie said shortly. "I had to shove Mary up here and although I'm strong for my size, she weighs about a ton heavier than me. It was a strain, I can tell you... How did you get on?"

Nicholas sat up and mopped his face with a grubby handkerchief.

"It wasn't very difficult, though I was scared when I slipped and nearly fell in the stable yard. He can't run fast, but I'll tell you what he can do. He can swear. If my Aunt Margaret knew what I'd heard just now she'd come and drag me back to Barton. I dodged him in the stable and hid in the hay loft. When he'd gone I gave him a few minutes and then got into the house where the scullery used to be. There isn't a scullery any more because they've knocked a lot of the rooms down by now. I think the other men must have gone to tea now."

Dickie explained that Nicholas had only got the foreman out of the way with a margin of a few seconds, but had hardly finished speaking before the drill started up again and they saw a cloud of dust rising slowly into the still air at the farthest end of the house.

"Now let's have a look round," Nicholas said as he got up. "You can see the Welsh hills and the pipe line after it's crossed the gorge and the drive to the Manor. See?"

As he pointed to where the drive disappeared over the brow of the hill to the north of the gorge - a part of the grounds they had not yet explored - a big lorry breasted the hill and lumbered towards the house. Because of the slope of the roof they were unable to see it draw up by the hut, but a few moments later they saw two men walking slowly across the grass in the direction of the gorge. The bigger of the two was carrying what looked like a canvas bag of workmen's tools and finding it very heavy. The other, who was wearing a brown suit, had round his shoulders an enormous coil of rope and he, too, was finding his burden awkward.

"That's Pudding Face!" Dickie gasped.

"And the man who wanted to buy our sofa at the sale," Nicholas added.

"Where are they going?"

"Isn't that the well over there?" Mary pointed. "That's where they're going."

Although the well was in a little hollow, they could see it quite clearly from the top of their tower, although it looked very tiny.

"If the chap in the brown suit heard David reading his copy of the letter last night, then he must have heard the clue about 'where the water'," Nicholas said as they watched the two men going slowly towards the well. "And if he did, p'raps he's thought of something that we haven't and believes that the diamonds are hidden near the well or down it... We ought to spy on those two... I think the others should know about this. Can we see any of them?"

They turned and looked down at their camp. Dickie, who had the sharpest eyes, spoke first.

"There is somebody there. Two people. Look! What are they doing, Nicky? They're running about and now they're pulling at one of the tents... Can't you see them?"

"I can!" Mary squeaked. "You're right, twin, but I'm sure they're not the others... Look! They've got a tent down... *Quick, twin. Quick as we can. Those two are enemies breaking up our camp.* We must go to the rescue. Let down the rope."

Nicholas was the first down and grabbed the bewildered Mackie from Mary, who quickly followed him. Dickie, shivering with excitement, came last and left the trapdoor open. They raced down the stairs until they were giddy and then the twins banged into Nicholas who seemed to be struggling with the door.

"Open it, open it!" Dickie shouted, and then in the gloom he realized that Nicholas was shouting, too.

"I can't. It's locked itself. I can't remember closing it when I rushed in but I suppose I must have done. I believe the key was in the outside lock but I'm not sure. This is a spring lock or something and it won't turn without the key... I'm sorry."

"Sorry!" Mary said in a small voice. "We're the only ones who know that our camp is being raided and do you mean that we can't do anything because we're locked in here? Is that what you're sorry about? Do you mean that the people who built this stupid tower made a stupid lock that only opens from the outside?"

Nicholas nodded miserably.

"Looks like it, Mary. What can we do?"

8. The Old Mill

Not long after the twins and Nicholas had left the camp to explore the Manor and the grounds, David and Tom got ready for their expedition.

"I'm still worried about leaving the camp unguarded," Tom admitted. "Trouble is that we can't lock everything up. I've got the idea we're being spied on all the time."

"I'm sure we've got to risk leaving it today," David said. "If we don't all work quickly, we shall miss a chance that may not come again. Surely nobody would actually steal anything from here or break up the camp?"

"We've been warned," Tom said seriously. "I'm sure that chap meant business and whoever is behind him means to get us out of here. They may know more than we do and they're dangerous."

"I've never heard you talk like this before," Peter said hotly. "S'pose that all you say is true? Even if our only enemies are Pudding Face and that old man in the brown suit, they can't be everywhere. There's only two of them, but there are seven of us, and Mackie, too. I can't think why you're so worried about this, Tom. It isn't like you."

Jenny, as usual, rallied to Tom.

"Of course it's like Tom to be thinking of us! And there are more enemies than just those two men. There's the woman, too. The woman with the earrings who told us we were trespassing. I'm not scared - not much, anyway - but I do think we've got to be careful."

Peter stood up and yawned.

"You started all this, Jenny. It's your adventure, really, but we've got to go through with it now and I know what David means about acting quickly... You two boys go and explore the gorge now and we'll take the country below the bridge down as far as the mill. If we find anything, or want you, we'll come up the gorge and whistle the peewit's call. You'll see anyone

coming down the gorge, of course, but you may not be able to warn us... Anyway, it's three o'clock now and we'd better all meet here by half past six if we haven't found each other before... You two boys have got the most to do if you're going to look for caves in the cliff so you'd better go at once."

"All boys are selfish," Jenny said as David and Tom hurried off towards the bridge. "I'm sure they've left us the most difficult job. I hate that old mill, but I wasn't going to tell them so. When shall we start?"

Peter lay down on the grass again, put her hands behind her head and closed her eyes so that the sun shone pink through her eyelids.

"Let's try to be subtle, Jenny," she whispered. "Let's really *think* before we do anything. Let's really try and put ourselves in the place of Harriet Brown."

"But that's what I've been saying for days, Peter. I can't forget Harriet. I'm sure she was beautiful and very, very tragic."

"So she may have been, but she was a thief, Jenny, and we mustn't forget that. Even if she had been persuaded to steal the necklace for this unknown man, she was still a thief who stole from people who trusted her. Now let's think again what she would do. She was scared of a detective who must have been suspicious of her and was watching her carefully. The man for whom she had stolen the diamonds seems to have deserted her, and so she wrote him the letter, part of which you found. She must have been nearly desperate, Jenny, when she said she was going to hide the diamonds."

Jenny, with her hands clasped round her knees, nodded. "I know. That's what's so tragic. P'raps she was so desperate that she hardly knew what she was doing when she ran out into the storm."

"We don't really know when she did run out of the house," Peter argued. "We know she was found drowned the day after a terrible storm - at least, I think that's what Miss Whiteflower said. Anyway, let's reckon that she had the necklace hidden somewhere in her room, or in the house. She was so terrified that the detective had discovered her secret, that she scribbled the letter to the man, had to hide it when somebody came into the room and

then, in a panic, ran out of the house... If *you* were in a panic like that, Jenny, where would you run?"

"Oh, Peter! You're arguing like a boy. Like David does. All the same, I know why you're trying to make us think like this. I believe that if I had been Harriet I should run away from people. I wouldn't go to the village unless I had friends there, so I s'pose I wouldn't go down the drive. She must have known where she was going to hide the necklace before she started out and so she must have gone near water."

Peter sat up. "Of course. Could be that well, but if it was I think she'd have written well and not water. No, Jenny. If either of us had been a panicky Harriet I believe we would have run down to the gorge. And she would run the quickest way down the little path the twins have just climbed and she'd have to cross the bridge. Let's go and look at that bridge. I'm sure that's where she would go first."

Peter led the way up the steep arch of the bridge and looked up the gorge. The water, dappled with splashes of sunlight shining through the branches of the overhanging trees, ran still and deep. "I can guess it's very different in the winter, Jenny. In a storm when a lot of water is coming down, the river could easily overflow the path. It would pile up on this side of the bridge, too, because the arch is so narrow. Let's try and guess what Harriet would do. Perhaps the river wasn't very high when she got here and I believe a good hiding place for the necklace might be under the arch... Let's look."

On the gorge side of the bridge they scrambled down a steep bank through nettles and a clump of fragrant meadow - sweet to a little raised beach of smooth pebbles over which the water was swirling.

"I'm not going to take my sandals off," Peter said. "It's easier to walk on the stones with them on." Treading very carefully she stepped under the arch of the bridge and held out a hand to help Jenny.

The bridge was not more than twelve feet wide, but no sunshine ever reached under the stone arch and the cold struck through their thin clothes as they crouched there with the water running over their ankles.

"She wouldn't have been able to see anything in the dark," Jenny said.
"How could she hide diamonds here?"

"She might have slipped them under a stone," Peter suggested as she stooped and lifted a flat, smooth rock and heaved it with a splash into the middle of the swiftly flowing stream.

For five minutes they lifted stones and searched the little beach on which they were standing. Once Jenny squeaked with excitement as she saw something bright gleaming in the water, but it was only the lid of a tin. The centre of the stream was too deep for them to move stones and they argued that if they weren't strong enough when the water was not particularly high, Harriet would not have been able to do any better alone with the water in flood.

Then they searched the stones of which the arch was built. Many little ferns were growing in the crevices where the mortar had crumbled away, but none of the stones was loose and there were no ledges or gaps in which a necklace could be hidden.

Jenny's teeth began to chatter. "S-s-silly of me, I know, but I'm j-jo-jolly cold. I don't think we'll find anything here."

"Doesn't look like it," Peter admitted, and then excitedly, "Listen, Jen. I thought I heard the peewit whistle. Keep quiet a sec, and don't move."

They crouched against the cold stones of the arch. There was a dangerous hole about two feet long and eight inches wide on the crown of the bridge and through this gap they could see the sunlight. Then they heard hurrying footsteps on the bridge itself and, as the shaft of sunshine was cut off, heard a strange rough voice say, "Look out! There's a blinking great hole here... Dangerous, I call it."

"Do wait here for a sec. I've got no breath left after all that running... Anyway, this is a crazy way to spend the afternoon. Dunno why I said I'd come with you."

Jenny and Peter looked at each other in surprise. The last speaker sounded like a girl, but both the strangers spoke in a country accent and they were probably leaning on the parapet looking downstream.

"You know why," the first speaker went on. "You know we got to see this through now... There are seven of 'em, he said. Seven all sleeping in those little tents. We've got to make sure that they're all out of the way. The two chaps we saw messing about with the old boat are the biggest and they'll be up there out of the way for a while yet. Let's have a good scout round first and we'd best go at once. No time to waste."

It sounded as if the girl complained at being hurried, but the two listeners soon heard footsteps over their heads and then the sound of the strangers' voices died away.

"Let's follow them, whoever they are," Jenny whispered. "They know all about us and we must find out more about them."

Peter splashed her way to the steep bank and, after signalling to Jenny to keep quiet and stay where she was, scrambled up cautiously.

There was nobody in sight and no sound of voices.

"Come on up, Jenny," Peter said quietly. "They didn't know we were under the bridge so they can't be deliberately hiding from us. Where do you think they've gone?"

Jenny blinked in the strong sunlight.

"They haven't climbed the hill, that's certain. We could see them easily, if that was the way they went. There are plenty of places to hide though, Peter. The bracken is high along the side of the path and I s'pose they could easily have run as far as the bushes down by our camp."

"Our camp! I hadn't thought of that. P'raps we ought to go back and guard it? Those two can't be far away, Jenny. I climbed up almost as soon as they ran off the bridge, but I've got the feeling we're being spied on now."

"We've got to do something, Peter. You heard what one of them said about Tom and David messing about in an old boat, didn't you? I'm wondering whether we ought to go and find the boys and tell them what we heard? I'm sure the camp should be guarded."

"Come to think of it, Jenny, we believed we heard the peewit's call, didn't we? I expect David saw these two coming along the gorge and whistled to warn us. I wonder where they found that boat?"

I don't know, but I wish Tom was here now and then there would be enough of us to guard the camp and maybe spy on those two strangers as well... What shall we do, Peter? We're wasting time now."

"See that hawthorn tree by the path? Let's go there first. P'raps if those two spies have seen us now, they'll give themselves away by moving. If we go straight to the camp they might ambush us. They couldn't know that we were under the bridge, but if they looked back they've certainly seen us by now and they seem to know more about us than we know about them. Come on, Jenny."

The hawthorn at which she pointed was at the edge of the path that ran below the hillside parallel to the river. It was almost opposite their camp and about seventy yards from the bridge.

"Don't hurry," Peter whispered. "We've got as much right to be here as anyone else and I hope they'll give themselves away. They can't have gone far."

Jenny gripped her arm.

"I saw those bushes move, Peter. I'm sure somebody is spying on us... There! Just to the left of our camp."

Peter couldn't see anything suspicious, but suddenly she was sure that she and Jenny must see this through by themselves. The boys were obviously busy in the gorge and it was absurd to be so scared of two people they had not even met, that they were going to give up before they had started.

"It's no use staying here, Jenny," she said. "Perhaps those two spies are watching us, but we can't run away now. Let's go straight to the camp and see if they've been there and then decide what to do next. But don't speak too loudly in case they're hiding close by and want to hear what we say... Let's go before we change our minds."

Jenny was trying hard not to look frightened. It was no use pretending that she wasn't scared because she was. She had never been very brave when by herself, but there were two people in her life whom she would follow anywhere - Peter and Tom.

"All right, Peter," she said quickly. "Let's pretend we're not interested in anything here except the camp and just having fun. If one of us is sure that the enemy is hiding close by let's just whistle something we know like 'God Save the Queen'."

They walked slowly across the sunlit meadow to the bushes screening the camp. Without looking to right or left they walked in single file along the track to the little clearing where the tents were pitched. All was as they had left it. There was no sign of any disturbance. They talked to each other as naturally as they could, although Jenny's voice seemed squeakier than usual.

"It's so hot, Peter," she said. "Let's rest here for a bit. The others will be back soon and then we can all bathe."

Peter took the cue and they sat down together by the cold ashes of the camp fire. Peter was trying hard to catch the feeling we all have sometimes - the sense that someone we cannot see is watching and listening. She lay back on the grass and closed her eyes. All was quiet but for the murmur of the river a few yards away and the distant sound of a lorry changing gear and toiling up a hill.

And so they stayed for ten minutes until Jenny sat up and whispered, "Let's go down to the mill and the cottage now. We promised we would and I don't think we're being watched."

Peter did not even open her eyes. "P'raps not, but I'm sure those two are somewhere around. Don't forget that we heard them say they had to be sure we were all out of the way. They're our enemies and they must be working for the two men who want us to leave the gorge. They know more than we do, Jenny. I've been wondering whether they've been told to search our camp for the letter David was reading the other night when the man in the brown suit was listening? I'm wondering now whether we ought to stay here and guard the camp until the boys come. What do you think?"

Jenny sat up. "We must stay together, Peter. We promised to go and explore the ruined cottage and the mill, and I'm sure I shall hate to tell Tom and David that we were scared to leave the camp. Let's go, but let's be as quick as we can and then find the boys."

Peter jumped to her feet. "Of course, you're right. Come on."

As they walked down to the river bank they were both tempted to look back over their shoulders. They paused when they reached the water and looked over to the thick undergrowth on the other side of the river. A flash of vivid blue streaked downstream and as Jenny whispered, "Kingfisher!" Peter thought she noticed a movement behind a tree in the shadows across the water. It seemed to her like a brief glimpse of scarlet, but as she could hardly believe her senses she said nothing as she led the way down the narrow track on the river's bank towards the mill.

Soon, as they remembered, the river narrowed and the water ran deeper.

Everything was different in the green gloom of this second gorge and Peter felt her heart thumping with sudden fear of the unknown. The roaring of the turbulent river was now so loud that Jenny, just behind her, had to shout.

"Don't fall in that ditch where the water runs to the mill," she yelled. "I don't like this place, Peter. It gives me the creeps."

Peter didn't like it, either. She was profoundly uneasy and now had the feeling that they were not alone in the gorge. She remembered the glimpse of scarlet seen across the water only a few minutes ago and realized that the river at that point was shallow enough to wade. She pushed back a bramble,

ducked under an overhanging branch and nearly fell into the brick-lined ditch. She held out her hand to Jenny and together they jumped across. A minute later they were standing outside the jungle of undergrowth which once had been the front garden of the cottage. As before, the atmosphere was chill and dank, and Peter wondered why ever she had agreed to come and explore this horrible place.

"The door is nailed up," she whispered. "We might be able to get in through one of the broken windows, but it's almost too dark to see."

"The downstairs windows are boarded up, too," Jenny said in a shaky voice. "This isn't a job for us, Peter. The boys didn't know it was as bad as this. We should want tools to break in here."

Peter had her hand on the rotting gate-post - the gate had gone long ago - and was staring at the derelict cottage when some instinct made her turn and look back the way they had come. Her hand flew to her mouth as she stifled a scream.



Her hand flew to her mouth as she stifled a cry.

Her hand flew to her mouth as she stifled a scream.

Two strangers were standing a few yards away watching them in silence. One was a youth of about eighteen wearing a garish, checked shirt and tight black trousers. His face was sallow, and a lock of lank, black hair fell across his forehead. An unlit cigarette hung from his lip. His companion was a pretty, fair girl. She was wearing a blue shirt and scarlet jeans and in that first second Peter realized that the jeans were a darker colour below the knee... So she *had* seen something red on the other side of the river; these two had obviously waded across and followed them down the track. They were undoubtedly the couple they had heard talking on the bridge.

Then Jenny saw them. Her mouth opened and Peter saw a hot blush of shock and surprise cover her neck and face.

"Steady, Jenny!" she said under her breath and then lifted her chin and stared at the strangers in silence. The girl gave a nervous giggle and the lout looked down and fumbled for a match. He was the first to speak.

"Where are your pals?" he asked, and they recognized his voice. It had a country burr to it.

Peter heard Jenny take in a deep, shaky breath and then say, "What a cheek! What are our friends to do with you? And what does it matter where they are?"

"Let me tell them, Syd," the girl said as she stepped forward and pushed back a strand of blonde hair. She really was pretty in a vulgar sort of way and Peter noticed that her finger-nails were painted scarlet.

"It's like this," she began with a half-grudging look of admiration at Peter. "We know about your camp, and we know you've been told it would be better if you cleared out. We've come to warn you. Just want you to know that you'll be sorry if you don't go. None of you seems to have any sense. Can't understand English. Why don't you all clear out and save yourselves and everybody else a lot of trouble?"

"Why does everybody round here want us to go?" Jenny said hotly. "Why can't you leave us alone? We're not doing anybody any harm and anyway all our friends are due back at the camp in a few minutes. We were just having a look at this old place and then we're going back to meet them there. Anyway, why are you spying on us?"

"Don't trouble to deny it," Peter added. "We saw you the other side of the river, and we know you stopped on the bridge and talked about us. What's it all about?"

"Quite the girl detective, aren't you?" the lout sneered as he puffed cigarette smoke rudely in their direction. "Stop arguing and clear out or we shall have to help you."

"Shut up, Syd," the girl said. "That's not the way to talk to them. Now, you two. Just listen to me before I get fed-up trying to help you. It's true we have been watching you, because we think you've all gone crazy snooping about the river and the gorge and the old house up there. What we're trying to tell you is that this is an unhealthy place to camp. It's bad. Everybody in the village where we live knows that it's bad."

"Bad? Why? What do you mean?" Peter said quietly.

"We'll tell you. This gorge is haunted."

"Haunted?" Jenny gasped. "What by?"

"By a woman. She was drowned here years ago. Some say that she might have been murdered, but everyone knows her ghost has been seen here."

"We had a live ghost round our camp the other night," Peter said grimly. "Our dog bit a piece out of his trousers. We're not afraid of that sort of ghost."

"No need to try and be funny," the girl went on. "You can ask anybody who lives round here and they'll tell about this poor woman's ghost, There's another thing, too. This gorge is real dangerous when it rains. All the meadows are flooded and the bridge will soon be washed away. You don't

have warning, either. It may not rain much down here but the water comes rushing down the gorge when it's rained in Wales and you can hear it roaring in the village."

"Thanks very much," Peter said. "Thanks for the warning. We can look after ourselves in a storm and we don't believe in hauntings. I s'pose you'll tell us next that this old mill and the cottage are haunted?"

The lout flicked away his cigarette end and stepped up to the girls.

"There are always fools who don't believe in ghosts," he sneered. "Don't say we didn't warn you. You were going to look in the cottage, weren't you? I haven't been in there for years so let's all have a look - if you're not too scared. Maybe you'd rather wait for your two boy-friends, though."

"Much rather," Peter agreed quickly. "But you needn't think we're frightened. Are you strong enough to wrench those boards off the door?"

The girl looked questioningly at *her* boy-friend as if she were wondering what he was talking about, and then followed the other three down the overgrown path between the nettles.

Syd, evidently peeved by Peter's sneer about his strength, wrenched with all his strength at the thickest of the two boards across the door of the cottage. To his evident surprise he loosened one end, and eased it away from the door. The other board was easier, and in half a minute each plank was hanging from the doorpost by a single nail.

"There you are," he boasted, and stooped to pick up a large flat stone which he held in one hand and pulled open the old door with the other. The rusty hinges screamed a protest and Jenny checked a scream as she saw a film of cobwebs across the doorway.

"I'll bet you're both too scared to take a look inside," Syd went on. "Go on. Try! Of course it's haunted. Full of rats and bats, too, I shouldn't wonder. See for yourselves," and in a flash he stood aside and pushed Peter over the threshold.

"And the other little fool," he yelled triumphantly. "Shove her in," and Jenny was pushed in, too. She stumbled and fell full length on to Peter who was struggling to her feet. While they tried to sort themselves out the door was slammed and Syd began to hammer the boards back into place with the stone. The first was secured before Peter could reach the handle of the door, which came off in her hand as soon as she gripped it. With Jenny now beside her, the two girls struggled to push back the door but they were no match for the two outside. They heard the other girl's mocking laugh and then, as the last nails were hammered home, Syd's sneering voice knocked all the fight out of them for a few moments.

"You'll be in there long enough to cool down. If you get out before morning you'd best go straight home to your mothers. Get out of Bringewood and stay out. You're not wanted here, and you can tell your soppy little pals that there'll be worse trouble coming to you all if you're here tomorrow. You'll have nowhere to sleep tonight, anyway... Come on, beautiful. We'll go and have some fun."

The girl laughed again, and as the sound of their footsteps died away Jenny clutched Peter's arm and screamed.

Behind them in the shadows of the decaying house there was a scratching, rasping noise.

9. The Attack on the Camp

David and Tom went off to explore the gorge with some misgivings. Neither of them liked leaving the girls and they argued about it all the way along the river's bank until they reached the aqueduct.

"It's only that we shall be quicker doing this job together," David argued. "Peter and Jenny are good at all sorts of things - Peter's a much better swimmer than either of us and there's nothing Jenny wouldn't try - but we've got to search this gorge. I believe there are caves in the cliffs and both of us are better climbers than the girls. You know perfectly well that if they were with us now - or if you were with Jenny - we should waste time helping them up and down the cliffs."

"All the same," Tom grumbled, "I don't like the idea of them exploring the ruined cottage and the mill. If we'd had any sense we'd have brought them here and they could have acted as sentries, and Peter might have brought her bathing things and swum along the opposite bank under the trees."

"You've got something there, Tom," David agreed. "I'm not at all sure that we're on the right side of the gorge. If Harriet Brown ran down to the river through the storm with the idea of hiding the necklace, she wouldn't have to come over to this side, would she?"

"You mean she'd run down the hill - past the old well, p'raps - and struggle through all those bushes and trees to the bank nearest the Manor? I reckon she might do that, but didn't Nicholas say that there was no path on that side?"

"I think he did. I suppose this track is a right of way but the Whiteflowers wouldn't need a path on their side. Maybe we'd better try over there first? But what about this aqueduct, Tom? Could she have crossed the river by it? If we could find the next page of the letter, perhaps we would see that she wrote 'where the water crosses the water'."

Tom thought this to be a brilliant deduction, so they climbed up the bank and looked again at the bridge carrying the great iron pipes across the river.

"Even if this was built at the time the diamonds were stolen - and I should think Harriet Brown saw this looking just the same as it does now - she would never have been able to cross by it," David said.

Tom had to agree. Those who planned and built the aqueduct had made sure that nobody would trespass on their property. Every inch of the bridge was guarded with a fence of iron spikes and a small gate for the use of the Water Company's officials was heavily padlocked. It was not even possible for an agile person to cross by holding on to the fence itself.

"Suppose she tried to cross?" David suggested. "S'pose she was so desperate to escape from the Manor that she tried and fell down this steep bank into what the twins would call the foaming torrent? Suppose that's what happened?"

"If it did we shall never find the necklace," Tom said gloomily. "If it wasn't found on her body - and we don't know that for certain - it's probably at the bottom of the river and it would take even a frogman months to search for it. Come on. If we're going to look for caves, let's go now. Even if we do find one I shall want to know how that wretched woman Harriet found her way there in the dark."

They found two caves within a few minutes. The first was on ground level and hidden behind a screen of elders already heavy with clusters of ripening berries. Tom, grumbling and muttering as he pushed through nettles and brambles, was the first to see its dark entrance in the limestone cliff. It was a nasty little cave only about six feet deep and four feet high. Somebody had been there before them and left a circle of ashes from a camp fire, and two rusty tins.

"If Harriet hid anything here she must have been crazier than I'm sure she was," Tom said grimly. "She'd never find her way here in a storm. I reckon we're wasting our time this way, David. Honestly I do. How can we possibly find a few diamonds in about four square miles of country? What we ought to be worrying about is the clue."

David crawled out of the cave backwards.

"What clue? We've got it, haven't we? "Where the water." And I wish you'd be a bit more cheerful, Tom. I know it's all very difficult but we've promised to help young Nicholas. And I like Miss Whiteflower, too. She's relying on us."

"I know. I know. I just think we're crackers. We're doing all this the wrong way. We've only got half the clue, David. There's a good chance that Harriet didn't finish her letter with those words, anyway. S'pose that the next sheet would tell us exactly what we want to know? S'pose that it's hidden in one of the chairs those crooks bought?"

"You can bet they've smashed those chairs into little bits searching for another clue," David said. "They know we've got the sofa, but we just don't know whether they've found a better clue than ours."

"Could be," Tom agreed. "Suppose they don't know what we know? But that old chap does, o'course. He heard you reading it out loud in the camp last night. It's because they're not sure how much we know that they're so keen to get us out. Sorry if I'm a bit touchy. I'm worried about the girls in that rat-haunted old mill and I reckon we're wasting time this side of the river. Come on."

David saw the second cave a few minutes later when they were forcing their way through the undergrowth between the path and the face of the cliff. It was about fifteen feet above the ground with a ledge outside the entrance. A tree, growing almost against the cliff, looked easy enough to climb so David said, "You go up, Tom. You ought to be able to see right into the cave. If you can't, give me a shout and I'll come up and see if one of us can climb in. O.K.?"

Tom nodded and jumped for the lowest branch of the tree.

He was soon on the level of the cave, to find there was nothing in it but the remains of a bird's nest. It was shallow, and without setting foot on the ledge he could see right to the back.

"Nothing here, David," he called. "This tree wouldn't have been as high forty years ago so Harriet wouldn't have had a chance of getting up here. I tell you that we're crazy wasting time on this side of the river."

He moved round cautiously and realized that he had an unexpected view of the opposite bank. He was high enough to see much more than from the path on their side of the river. He saw, above a screen of bushes, a little backwater only a few feet wide and parallel with the main stream. This secret water was like a harbour and on it was floating an old punt.

He told David of his discovery before he was down the tree. "Let's get round there as quick as we can. We're more likely to find a clue on that side of the river. We can explore the opposite bank better from that punt and there may be streams coming in from that side that we can't see from here. Come on!"

David agreed and they raced across the bridge without a sight of the girls, who were by now actually on their way to this very place. The undergrowth on this side of the river was much thicker, there was no track by the bank, and neither were the cliffs as sheer. It seemed to take a long time for them to find the punt and they were just about to test it when they heard the sound of voices. Tom jumped for the low branch of the nearest tree and pulled himself up.

Then David, trying to see for himself who was on the opposite bank, pushed aside the branches of the bushes, missed his footing and slipped into the water. He brought down part of the bush, too, and when he looked across the river he saw two strangers staring at him - a sallow youth with a garish shirt and tight black trousers and a pretty fair girl in red jeans. The lout grinned when he saw David floundering in the water, said something to his companion and then they both hurried along the path towards the bridge.

"Never seen them before," Tom said. "Surely they can't be anything to do with Pudding Face and his nasty old friend? I don't suppose they'll worry us, but we may as well warn the girls that strangers are on the way," and holding the trunk of the tree with one arm he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled the peewit's haunting call. The Lone Piners' warning echoed down the gorge.

"They ought to hear that," he went on. "Now, if you've finished wallowing down there like a hippopotamus let's have a look at the punt. There are a couple of paddles in the bottom and we can explore this side of the river better from the water, I'm sure."

David, feeling rather a fool, scrambled up the bank and together they tried to haul the punt out of the river. It was too heavy to shift.

"Let's risk it," Tom said. "I can't see a hole in the bottom and with two paddles we ought to be able to manage the thing. Do you know anything about punts?"

David was trying to wring the water out of his khaki drill slacks.

"No, I don't, but let's try it. The thing to do is to keep it close in to this bank. There might be an entrance to another stream hidden by the bushes, or even a cave at water level. That would be the sort of place we want. You may be right, Tom, about Harriet being more likely to hide the necklace this side of the gorge. Let's have a go. I was a fool to fall in and I'm getting cold."

They got carefully into the punt and pushed off. The two paddles were unwieldy, waterlogged and slippery to hold, and they were glad there was nobody watching their amateurish efforts to control the heavy boat. It took them nearly half an hour to get as far upstream as where the aqueduct crossed it, and by then they were both hot and exhausted. They were also bad-tempered.

"I've had enough of this," David snapped, dropping his paddle in the water now covering the bottom of the punt and grabbing at a bush in an attempt to hold them steady. "You're generally bright enough, Tom, but this punt is not your smartest idea. When we're on land again I'll tell you exactly how silly I think it is. We're wasting time. Let's shove the beastly thing up against the bank and leave it."

Tom knew that David was right but began to argue. He maintained that it would be easier to manage the punt if they guided it downstream and that then they would really have a chance of exploring the Manor side of the gorge.

"We shall be sunk long before we get the chance of exploring anything," David said. "You're just being pig-headed, Tom, but I s'pose I'd better humour you. Come on, then."

He let go of the bush, picked up his paddle and pushed his end of the punt out into the current. Tom, very red in the face, tried to keep the punt straight with his paddle and then unaccountably dropped it in the river. He leaned over and tried to grab it but it was swept out of his reach downstream.

"Sorry, David. That was a fool's trick. Try and keep her straight - or better still get her into the bank now. Maybe you were right and we'd be better on land... Look out, you ass! Keep her straight!"

But David was in trouble. Neither of them had ever been in control of the wayward, wallowing punt and now, by himself, he had no chance of managing it in the current which was so much stronger than they had expected.

Tom scrambled on hands and knees through the water now swirling at the bottom of the punt and tried to help him, but there was little they could do with only one paddle between them. Once the current swung them almost into the bank where they had seen the two strangers. Tom scrambled again to the end he had just left and tried a grab at a clump of rushes. All that he did was to cut his hand as the current swung the punt round again in midstream.

"Nothing I can do now," David shouted. "Shall we swim for it? We may hit the bridge if we can't get her through straight."

For the first time Tom looked scared. He looked ahead and saw the narrow arch of the bow bridge with the water surging strongly through it. Then the punt swung round almost broadside and he glanced at David in the stern holding the paddle across his chest like a weapon.

"O.K., David. Let's stay in and hope for the best. No need to get wet until we must. If we bash into the arch jump into the water. It soon gets shallow the other side."

The bridge rushed towards them. Tom crouched in the bows as the punt swung broadside again and then, caught by the full force of the water, it rushed towards the bridge. David thrust his paddle into the water in an attempt to straighten the punt, but failed. They spun into the cool shadow of the bridge and with a rasping crunch the bows grounded in the shallows where the girls, not so very long ago, had been searching the stones of the arch for a clue. Before Tom could do anything practical the current took the stern and swung the punt round so that again they were broadside to the current. David tried to thrust them clear of the arch with his paddle but the latter snapped in his hand. The stern hit the stonework with a splintering crash, water poured over the side, and then they were in the open again where the river widened and ran pleasantly in its shallow bed until it roared into the second gorge by the old mill.

David looked ruefully at the stump of the paddle which he was holding, and then laughed as the water-logged punt hit a smooth rock and grounded on a spit of shingle in midstream. Tom fell backwards into the punt as David threw the stump of the paddle into the water and then helped him up.

"Just as well the girls didn't see us do that act," he said. "We haven't been very clever, Thomas. We must ask Nicholas if he knows who the punt belongs to but I'm afraid it's done its last job. Let's go down to the camp and see that all's well. I must put some dry clothes on, too. How did you like shooting the rapids under the bridge?"

Tom stepped out on to the little shingle island and then grinned ruefully.

"Sorry about all that, David. My fault, really. We seem to work better on land, don't we? We'll go back to the gorge soon as we've changed."

But they did not get back to the gorge that day. Together they waded through the shallows in the middle of the river, jumping from rock to rock.

"Wonder where the girls are?" Tom was saying just as they rounded the bend in the river that hid their camp, and at that moment they heard a shout that sent them floundering through the water to the bank. David was ashore first. To his fury and astonishment he saw the couple who had jeered at them in the gorge trying to wreck the camp. The lout was dragging at the

guy lines of a tent while the girl in the scarlet jeans was emptying one of their knapsacks of stores on to the grass.

With a shout of rage David dashed forward with Tom at his heels. The girl looked up, screamed a warning to her companion and then took to her heels. Her companion, who had a knife in his hand, stared open-mouthed at his enemies. Then he slashed at the green canvas of the nearest tent and with the cowardice of a bully turned to follow his girl-friend who was now breaking all records as she raced for the bridge.

But he wasn't quick enough. He tripped over one of the ropes and fell on his face. The knife flew from his hand, the naked blade gleaming bright in the sunshine.

David reached him first and hauled him to his knees by the collar of his shirt.

"Get up," he gasped. "Get up so that I can knock you down again, or would you like us to call your girl-friend to help you? O.K., Tom. I can manage him. Pick up his knife and chuck it in the river."

Tom looked at David in astonishment. He had never seen him so angry. He was pale under his sunburn and kept clenching and unclenching his hands as the lout shuffled back on his knees and then got to his feet. He was at least four inches taller than David but Tom could see that he was scared of him.

"I don't think you'll want any help., David," he grinned. "But I'll just stand by for a sec. P'raps he's got another knife somewhere - or maybe a gun? What a nasty type."

"Now then, you!" David knew that his voice was shaking so he spoke as quietly as he could. "Who are you and why were you smashing up our camp? We could get the police after you for this. We shall have to, anyway."

The lout fumbled in his shirt pocket for a cigarette and stuck it between his lips. And all the time he watched David warily.

"Police!" he sneered. "You're a fine lot to talk of police. What about yourselves? You stole that old punt, didn't you? And you're trespassing. You've been warned enough times to get out of this place. You kids can't understand English... Now gimme my knife before I set about you."

"Throw his knife in the water, Tom," David said, and as the latter stepped forward to obey a familiar voice called.

"Tom! David! Help us. Peter's hurt."

Both boys turned to see Jenny and Peter coming towards them up the track from the river. Peter, the taller, had her arm round Jenny's shoulder. She was pale and limping and the boys could see a blood-soaked handkerchief round her knee.

While David was looking the other way the lout aimed a fierce blow at his face. His fist struck David just below the eye and he staggered back and nearly fell as Jenny screamed. Then the lout turned to run, but Tom brought him down with a rugger tackle round the knees and was sitting on him when the girls came up.

David shook his head rather as Mackie always did after a fight. "Hold him, Tom. We'll see to him in a minute." Then he went over to Peter and with an odd but tender gesture touched her arm.

"What's up, Pete? What have you done to yourself?"

She looked at him as if there was nobody else there. Then her blue eyes filled with tears and it was Jenny who answered his question.

"That's the one who tricked us, David! He was with a girl and they pushed us in the old mill and locked us in. Peter cut her knee on broken glass. They told us they were going to smash up our camp..."

David whirled round. "Look after Peter, Jen," and then to Tom, who was struggling to keep their enemy on the ground, "Let him up, Tom. I'll deal with him."

None of the Lone Piners had ever seen David in his present mood. They knew him as cheerful and easy-going and Peter had said more than once that he was particularly annoying when he wouldn't quarrel or lose his temper.

He was certainly angry now. His face was pale but for a red patch on his cheekbone where he had been struck when he was looking at the girls. His voice was hardly recognizable when he motioned to Tom.

"Let him up, Tom. I want this chap."

Tom stood aside. "Get up, chum. We're not going to ask you to fight two girls. Only one of us at a time and don't be too scared because you're taller than either of us... *Get up!*"

The youth, still on his knees, looked round wildly. His lank and greasy hair was falling over his forehead and there was nothing left now of his previous swagger.

Tom laughed. "*Get up,*" he said again, and helped him with his shoe. "There you are, David. He's all yours and if there's anything left I'll have him presently."

It wasn't a long fight. David, looking small beside his opponent, knocked him down with his second blow. Neither of them had much idea of boxing. They both hit the air as well as each other, and David was very surprised when he stopped a full-blooded punch in the face that made him see stars. The truth was that he was still so angry that he didn't feel the blows he received and closed in on his taller adversary whenever he could.

He knocked his opponent down a second time with a blow under the heart, and when the lout staggered to his feet, shouting and swearing, David hit him with all his strength in the mouth. That was enough. He could take no more. He stumbled to his knees, put his hands to his cut lips and began to blubber. David dropped his fists, noticing that one of them was bleeding. Suddenly he felt a little sick and rather disgusted.

"Let him go, Tom. He's had enough."

Tom came over and they stood side by side and watched the lout stumble off down the track leading to the meadow and the bridge.

"Nice work, David," Tom said. "Couldn't have done the job better myself. I think you're going to have a lovely black eye and you made a mess of your knuckles on his teeth. I think you broke one. Won't his girl-friend love him? I don't think he'll come here again."

"Maybe he won't, but we've been fools, Tom. We've not found out who he is or where he comes from. Leave him now. I want to see what's happened to Peter."

His knees felt curiously weak as they walked over to the girls. Peter was sitting up with her back against the canvas of her tent. She was very pale but gave the boys a cheerful smile.

"I ought to call you 'my hero', David," she said. "I don't like fighting like that very much, but I'm not a bit sorry for him. He deserved it all and I'm very sorry for your poor eye. That poor Teddy boy hadn't a chance, had he, Tom?"

Jenny was on her knees beside her, lighting a tablet of solid fuel under their dented kettle.

"Please don't all start praising each other," she begged. "Can't you see that Peter has cut her knee badly? We must clean it up and one of you please get the First Aid box."

Tom jumped to the reprimand and David sat down beside Peter. "Let me see the cut," he said. The leg of her blue jeans below the right knee was dark with blood and the material was torn enough for him to see a nasty cut.

"You'd better get that cleaned up and covered and then tell us all about it," he said.

"Don't fuss, *please*, David. It just hurts to walk or run on it and it's been bleeding a lot. Jenny's in charge. She's been marvellous and if I were you I'd go and stick your head in the river. You're in a mess, too."

Tom came back with the First Aid kit and handed it to Jenny.

"See what's in it, Tom. We'll want cotton wool and disinfectant and that elastic dressing stuff to stick over when it's clean... Oh, Tom. I've got so much to tell you. We've had the most terrific adventure, but we must look after Peter first, mustn't we?"

Jenny really did enjoy looking after anyone who was hurt or ill and she managed Peter very well. First she cut away the torn and blood-soaked leg of the jeans and then put disinfectant into an enamel bowl and poured the boiling water in. While it was cooling David came back. He looked cleaner and cooler but one eye was already going purple. He seemed a little self-conscious about it but allowed Jenny to stick a strip of adhesive dressing over his cut knuckles.

Peter's knee did not look so bad when the blood had been cleaned off. Jenny dabbed the wound, which was not very deep, with disinfectant and then covered it with adhesive dressing.

"Now tell us what you two have been doing," David asked. "We can hardly wait to know how those two fooled you into the old mill. I wish I hadn't suggested that you girls did that bit of the river."

"Too late now," Jenny said cheerfully. "We thought you'd both been very, very selfish but we'd better tell you what we did. We shall have to tell it again when the twins and Nicholas come back but I s'pose you won't wait. Wonder what's happened to the others? It's getting late."

"They'll turn up when supper's ready," Tom said. "Here's some tea, anyway. Good idea, Peter. Tell us now while the nurse is doing up your knee."

So Peter told them how they had searched for diamonds under the bridge, how they had heard Tom's warning whistle and overheard the conversation of their enemies above them. Jenny took up the tale of how they had felt they were being watched and how they had been tricked and pushed into the cottage.

"We can just tell you two boys," she went on excitedly, "that when we were locked in that absolutely foul and ghastly ruin, I was quite terrified. Just after they'd laughed and told us that we should have to spend the night there and we were still struggling with the front door, we heard a most horrible noise somewhere upstairs... I can't exactly explain the noise. Can you, Peter?"

Peter, now smelling strongly of disinfectant, was looking better and enjoying her tea.

"It was the most ghostly noise I've ever heard," she said. "It wasn't like anything much and that's why we were so scared. We stayed shivering behind the door waiting for it to come again and praying that nobody was hiding upstairs. After a bit I whispered to Jen that we might see whether the upstairs windows were boarded over. We were really too terrified to move, but we managed to get up the stairs. Then we heard the noise again. It was made by a branch of a tree rubbing against the window. You wouldn't have thought that there would be much wind today, but it couldn't be anything *but* wind, could it?"

"Anyway, neither of us are keen to go into that place again and I just don't believe that Harriet would have gone there on the night of the storm unless she had an accomplice. Those windows weren't boarded up and I broke the glass with a bit of wood because they wouldn't open. It was easy to get into the tree from the window, but I didn't see a jagged bit of glass when I was climbing out... We were lucky to escape as easily. The nasty type my hero has just beaten up, told us that we could spend the night there and threatened to do something to the camp. Jenny was wonderful about my knee but I couldn't hurry." She looked up and gave the boys a radiant smile. "Don't get conceited but we were jolly glad to see you and I'm sorry to be making rather a fuss about all this."

Jenny looked at David and giggled.

"David! Your eye is going purple and we haven't got any raw steak to put on it. We've only got corned beef in tins. Peter can't move about much and you're wounded, so why don't you two look after each other and tidy up the camp while Tom comes with me to search for the others? Do you realize

how late it is? Those kids ought to have been back before now. Dickie must be getting hungry. Coming, Tom?"

Tom winked at Peter and David.

"You two tidy up before it gets dark. That little blonde so-and-so was chucking our stores into the bushes so you'll have quite a time hunting for them, David. I've got a feeling that the twins might have got young Nicholas into trouble again. We'll go up to the house first."

"I do think we ought to find the twins, Tom," Jenny said as soon as they were out of earshot, and then, when he looked puzzled she went on, "I mean that I do think you ought to take me out sometimes, Tom. I thought hunting for the others would be a nice thing for us to do together."

For a moment Tom looked down at her as if he was going to laugh. Then, very sensibly, he changed his mind.

"Good idea, Jen. Wasn't too good shut up in that old cottage, was it? I thought we were wrong to let you and Peter go there. Do you know, I've never seen David as fighting mad as he was with that chap just now. We shall have to find out who he is."

"David was wonderful but you would have been wonderful, too, Tom, if I'd cut my knee like that, wouldn't you?"

Tom didn't answer because they were now toiling up the steep hill towards the Manor and were too breathless to talk. The sun was going down and when they looked back over the trees of the gorge to the west the sky was a lovely luminous, pale green. Away to the south a few fleecy clouds tinged with pink were moving northwards in a wind which they could not feel below. When they reached the top of the hill and looked down at the deserted Manor, Tom said, "I got a feeling weather's going to change. I reckon Uncle Alf would say so and he's never wrong. It's those clouds... Now where are those kids?"

The answer, although at first it puzzled them, came at once. Faint but unmistakable came the peewit's lament and when Tom whistled in reply it

came again.

"Where are they, Tom? I can't see a signal or anything, but they can see us, I'm sure. Let's run down to the house. They must be there somewhere."

They ran down the hill and it was Jenny who noticed something waving above the battlements of the ugly tower. Dickie told them later that he was likely to die of exposure because he had used his shirt as a signal of distress. It didn't take as long to rescue them as it took the prisoners on the tower to explain to their rescuers how to find the room with the door to the stair. Dickie and Nicholas screamed themselves hoarse before they were able to make themselves understood, and Tom was highly amused when he found the key still in the lock. As soon as the door swung back the twins, Nicholas and Macbeth rushed into the room.

"It's wonderful, wonderful, Tom," Mary said. "When we saw it was you down there we said to ourselves, my twin an' me, we said that Thomas will leave us up here to starve because he's always hated us."

"And *then*," Dickie added quickly, "our bones up there would be picked whiter and whiter by wild owls and bats and things. We know lots that has happened but is the camp all right? We saw two people trying to smash it up and then somebody chased them away and had a fight, and we s'pose it was David and Tom. Was it? Oh, good! Is everything all right now because it's getting too dark for us to see much from the top of our watch tower and now we're starving."

Nicholas kept trying to speak but didn't get a chance until the twins paused for breath. Then he told Tom and Jenny about the two men who had gone off with tools and rope towards the well.

"Tell us your news as we go, but I'd like to see what they were up to before we go back to camp. Perhaps they're still there. Let's go and spy on them."

It seemed unwise to approach the well from the house side, but dusk had fallen by now and they risked it. Macbeth, glad of his freedom, pranced ahead and would have given warning if anybody had been there.

The first thing they noticed when they reached the well was a refreshing smell of damp earth and grass. Then Jenny tripped over a heavy canvas bag, which when opened seemed to be full of such tools as hammers, chisels and steel wrenches.

"We could drop all the lot down the well," Dickie said thoughtfully but hopefully. "It would make a wonderful splash."

"No," Tom argued. "I know what they're trying to do. They're trying to empty the well because they think the necklace is down there somewhere. But I don't see how they could possibly empty it - not just two of them hauling up this big bucket. I reckon they've given up for the night. We'll come back tomorrow and spy on them. Let them do the work for us if they're going to try and empty the well, and don't let's leave anything to show we've been here. Don't touch the tools, Dickie."

He leaned over the parapet and shone his torch into the well. Far below they saw the gleam of water and Jenny shivered. "It still looks very deep and cold," she whispered. "I wonder if poor Harriet threw the necklace down there in a panic? I don't think so. She wouldn't have written 'where the water' if she meant to hide it in a well."

Tom switched off the torch. "Let's get back. Peter and David will be worrying and we've a lot to tell each other."

They all sat for a long time round the camp fire after supper. David and Peter had tidied up, found the stores and got a meal ready but it was obvious that neither of them was feeling up to much. Peter had little to say and David's eye was very swollen.

They all agreed that Tom's decision to leave the well alone was sensible, but couldn't make up their minds what to do tomorrow. Perhaps this was because they were all tired and it was noticeable, too, that David, usually so quick to lead, seemed gloomy and dispirited.

Jenny was the first to get up.

"I'm going to bed. We're all getting scratchy and can't make up our minds. Everything will be different tomorrow. P'raps we shall even find the treasure tomorrow? Let's believe that's going to happen."

She was asleep long before Peter, who fidgeted in her sleeping-bag for what seemed like a long time before she went to sleep. It was an uneasy sleep and she was soon dreaming - a horrible dream which woke her trembling to the reality of a throbbing knee. As she opened her eyes the dream was still very vivid. She had seen the figure of a beautiful young woman dressed in the curious clothes of many years ago. She knew this woman to be Harriet Brown who was running, running, running in fear and a terrible loneliness - running to her death along the bank of the river.

Peter sat up. Her cheeks were hot. The knee throbbed like a bad tooth.

She opened the flap of the tent and looked out into a strange world, grey in the light of the late rising moon. Then she choked back a scream.

An unknown, shadowy figure was standing on the river's bank.



A shadowy figure was standing on the river's bank.

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10. Nicholas the Hostage

Peter's heart thudded with fear as she saw the strange, shrouded figure standing in the misty moonlight by the river's bank. Waking so quickly from her nightmare of Harriet Brown it seemed, for a horrid moment, that her dream had come true. She put a hand behind her and touched the sleeping Jenny. Only a few yards away David, Tom, the twins and Nicholas were sleeping in their tents, but why should she be the one to wake in fear with silly ideas about ghosts?

Then she realized that if she was the only one awake she must certainly give the alarm. Of course, the mysterious figure could not be Harriet Brown; it was probably one of those trying to force them to leave Bringewood.

Should she wake Jenny first, or one of the boys? David, of course. She crawled from her sleeping-bag and gave a sudden cry of pain as she hurt her injured knee. It was an involuntary cry but the night was so quiet that the watcher on the river bank heard it and moved. Still Peter found it impossible to identify man or woman. The figure seemed to be wearing a cape and as it moved towards the camp, Peter, calling on all her courage, stood up. Then she realized that Macbeth had not given an alarm, but before she could reason that out the mysterious figure called her by name in a hoarse whisper.

It was David! David, wearing a mackintosh and a blanket draped round his shoulders. She was so angry that she forgot she was standing barefoot in the dewy grass in her pyjamas.

"You fool, David! What do you think you're doing? You terrified me. I thought you were a ghost. You are an idiot."

He took the blanket from his shoulders and put it round hers. "What woke you up? Get into a coat or something and come out here. I want to talk to you and I don't want to wake the others."

She looked at him in surprise. In the moonlight his face was pale and tired. She forgot the pain in her knee, and although her teeth began to chatter she reached into her tent for her slacks and a sweater, slipped into them and followed David back to the river's bank.

He touched her hand. He was very cold. "Sorry to scare you, Peter. How's the knee?"

"Not too good, David. I had a nightmare. I thought you were the ghost of Harriet Brown. In my dream she was walking up and down the river bank. Right here. It was so real that when I woke and looked out of the tent and saw you standing there I was terrified... What's happened, David? More trouble? You don't look too good yourself. Why were you skulking about disguised in a blanket? Aren't you tired?"

"I'm so tired that if I wasn't talking to you now I'd be fast asleep. You scared me, too. I was thinking about you."

He made the last comment so quietly and simply that for a moment she hardly realized what he said. Then she flushed and whispered,

"Why me, specially? You haven't told me what you're doing out here by yourself."

He answered the last question first.

"I'm supposed to be a sentry. I didn't want to say much to the others but I don't like this business, Peter. I'm worried about the twins and Nicholas. It's getting tough, and Tom and I agreed to take turns to stay on guard. I'm not due to wake him for another hour, but I'm sorry I scared you. I didn't know you were going to dream about poor Harriet, did I?"

She was full of contrition.

"I was the fool, David. I'm so sorry I said what I did. It was rude and silly of me, and just like you to think of doing sentry without telling Jenny and me, though you ought to have done... Let's talk out here for a bit. Tell me what you're so worried about."

He spread his mackintosh on the river's bank and sat down beside her.

"I've got a thing about this river, Peter. I hate it. There's something wrong about it, as Miranda hinted. It's made nothing but trouble for the Whiteflowers and nothing but trouble for us. It's Nicholas in particular I'm so worried about. We're responsible for him and we've never come up against a proposition like these two men and that specimen with his girl friend this afternoon, have we? What do you think we ought to do, Pete?"

Peter was not feeling well. Her hands and face were hot and dry and yet her teeth were trying to chatter. She didn't want David to know.

"Do you think we've got a chance of finding the necklace, David? Honestly? What about the well? If those two men are going to all that trouble it might be that they know something that we don't?"

"Wells aren't easy to empty, Peter. I'm sure that when they go back in the morning they'll find the well full again in spite of the water they've already taken out. Wells are only dug where there are springs, and the water runs into the well through cracks between the stones. If they don't know that, they're sillier than we are. I just don't see how two men could hope to empty a great well like that and it puzzles me why they try."

"Never mind the well, then. Do you think we've any chance of finding the necklace?"

"Not really. Only with luck. Tom thinks we ought to concentrate on finding the rest of Harriet's letter-----"

"But she may not have written any more," Peter interrupted. "It's not like you to give up over a thing like this, David. We've got to beat those two men, and if we can't do it ourselves we shall have to call in the grown-ups. Of course, we don't want to do that, but the treasure belongs to the Whiteflowers and we've promised to help them. Let's not decide to do anything until the morning, David. We'll all feel better then. Do you have to wake Tom now? Can't you just go to bed yourself now and risk it? I don't think anyone would attack us now, and David-----"

She paused and looked across the water tumbling between the smooth rocks and sliding over its shallow bed on its way to the rapids at the head of the second gorge. A cloud sailed across the moon and the cold light faded. David touched her fingers and held them.

"What were you going to say?"

"Only that you're often thinking of other people, aren't you? I bet you thought of this sentry business yourself and you wouldn't have said anything tomorrow, would you?"

He stood up in the darkness, took her other hand and helped her to her feet.

"I'll wake Tom because I promised I would. You'd better go back. Don't wake Jenny and we'll talk in the morning. You're right about everything seeming different then... How's the knee, Peter? Your hands are hot."

She pulled her hands free and put her arm through his as they walked back to the camp.

"It hurts a bit. I scraped it crawling out of my bag. I'm glad I woke up, though, and thank you for guarding us." Then she put her hands on his shoulders, kissed him lightly and limped across to the tent.

David went to his, and forgot to wake Tom.

There were no alarms during the night. If David dreamed, Peter did not wake until Jenny leaned over her and said, "Nearly eight, Peter. Nobody seems to be up and aren't we going to spy on that well? It's colder, too. The weather doesn't look too good."

Peter yawned and remembered her knee. It was still throbbing but she was sure that she wasn't as feverish. She told Jenny to get dressed first and start the breakfast and then closed her eyes again and went over her talk with David of a few hours ago. She wondered whether they ought to give up the quest for the Whiteflower diamonds and go back to Seven Gates or Witchend and be safe. If they did this they would be failing to help Nicholas and Miss Whiteflower against two bullies who were almost certainly crooks

as well. She wondered what David would say at breakfast? She was surprised when he spoke to Jenny first.

"You're Peter's nurse, aren't you, Jen? Have you looked at the wound yet? I think she ought to go into Bringewood and see a doctor... O.K., Peter! You keep quiet. You're the patient and you have to do as you're told."

As the others were all arguing about wells and rivers and watch towers and punts and the obvious change in the weather at the same time, Peter did not even try to make herself heard. When the meal was over they all crowded round her tent as Jenny poured more disinfectant into the bowl of boiled water and pulled off the adhesive dressing.

"You're not sorry for me," Peter said. "It's just a sort of morbid curiosity - except from the twins, of course. They're young and have lots to learn and so they have to be curious about wounded people like me."

Mary giggled. "We think you and Jenny were very, very brave in those awful ruins. We think we were brave, too... Don't be so rude, David."

This was because David pushed them aside as Jenny began to bathe the wound. The cut looked clean but the knee was inflamed and puffy.

"You ought to have penicillin or something for that," David said. "Don't argue, Peter. We've got plenty to worry about without persuading you to look after yourself. You know that should be looked at. Where's Nicky? Good. He's sure to know a doctor in Bringewood. Will you take Peter into the village, Nicky? Tom or I would go but I'm not leaving this camp unguarded again if I can help it. You know a doctor, don't you?"

"Of course I'll go, David. Dr. Harvey is nice and I'll explain that Peter is a friend. He won't ask lots of questions, either... Ready now, Pete? Shall we walk or bike?"

Peter looked up from sticking on a new strip of plaster. "You make me sound like a parcel, 'To be called for'. We'll try bikes, Nicky. Cycling may hurt more but it'll be much quicker."

They fetched their bicycles and David pushed Peter's as far as the bridge.

"You're trying hard not to limp, Peter," he said. "Leave your bikes where we unpacked the cars at the end of the gorge and try to get a lift in a car. Tell the doctor exactly what happened and ask him to give you a shot of penicillin or something... And come back as soon as you can."

"We will, but please don't fuss, David, and please be here when we do come back. If you have to leave the camp, write a message and put it in my sleeping bag. I'm sorry I was such a fool as to cut this knee. I'm messing up everything. Come on, Nicholas."

Peter and Nicholas pushed their bikes over the hump of the bridge and mounted on the downward slope. David watched them free-wheeling down to the path on the river's bank. Nicholas turned to wave and although Peter was wobbling and pedalling very slowly she looked fairly safe.

But she had to give up by the time they reached the aqueduct. Every time she pressed the pedal it seemed that the cut opened in her injured knee, and although she tried pedalling with the sound leg and allowing the other to dangle free she soon knew that it would be easier to walk.

"Don't worry, Peter," Nicholas said as they hid their bicycles in a clump of bracken and walked up to the road. "We'll get a lift. I'm sure it's going to be our lucky morning. We'll soon have you fixed up and here comes a baker's van."

The sky was overcast when they thanked the van driver and got out opposite the doctor's surgery in Bringewood Chase. The weather was changing and Peter remembered how they had been warned about the river rising quickly when it rained in Wales, and almost as if he had guessed her thoughts Nicholas said,

"When you've had your knee done I'll show you round the village as you haven't seen it before. The bridge over the river is down there. It's a grand bridge and there's always somebody leaning on it and watching for fish. I hope there aren't too many waiting for the doctor, but don't you worry, Peter, I'll explain everything."

Peter protested. She didn't want to be managed and explained to a strange doctor and told Nicholas so.

"Wait for me, Nicholas. Go and buy some bread and then watch fish from your old bridge. I'll meet you there, but if I'm more than an hour you can come and wait in the surgery."

He was uneasy about leaving her but Peter insisted, so he went off, whistling cheerfully, to the baker's. There were only two women in the surgery, so she didn't have to wait more than half an hour. As Nicholas had said, Dr. Harvey was extremely nice and wasn't nosy when she told him about the camp and Nicholas Whiteflower. All he said was, "Nice weather for camping but the weather's going to change. How's young Nicholas? Good. Now let's look at the knee. Dirty piece of broken glass, you say?... I see... Nasty cut, but we'll soon put it right."

He talked to her while cleaning and putting two stitches in the cut. He covered it as Jenny had done, told her how to deal with it and then gave her an injection and told her not to overwork it for forty-eight hours. He ordered aspirin if she couldn't sleep, wished her a happy holiday and told her to come back if she had any pain or fever. She walked down to the bridge feeling much more cheerful. An old, old man was leaning over the parapet staring at the water, but there was no sign of Nicholas. She looked at her watch and found she had only been away forty-five minutes.

She went down to the river's edge and looked for him under the arches of the bridge, but he was not there. Then she went back and asked the old man, but he pointed to his ear and shouted, "It's no use, m'dear. I can't hear yer. I never wears me aid in the mornin's."

Peter limped back to the High Street and enquired in the baker's shop. The woman remembered Nicholas and knew him and said that he had left half an hour ago with a large parcel of bread. She looked in the other three shops and the Post Office and again in the doctor's surgery. She asked three different women in the street but nobody had seen Nicholas. She went back to the bridge but he was not there, and then, feeling angry and upset, she assumed that he had got tired of waiting and gone back to the others, and so she started to walk back herself. But somehow the more she thought about

Nicholas the more sure she was that he wouldn't have gone off without a very good reason. But why didn't he leave a message for her at the surgery? Then a car sounded its horn behind her and she realized that she was walking in the middle of the road. The elderly couple in the car smiled at her as they passed and then stopped and offered her a lift. Ten minutes later she was picking up her bicycle and wondering why Nicholas had not taken his. She was sure that they had not passed him on the road. It was all very puzzling and she was worried as she pushed her cycle back towards the camp. She saw nobody on the path but was glad to see Jenny on the bridge.

"You've been wonderfully quick, Peter. How did you get on? Where's Nicholas?"

"Hasn't he come back? I've lost him, Jenny. We arranged to meet on the bridge after I came out of the doctor's but he wasn't there and only a woman in the baker's can remember seeing him. I looked everywhere for him and then got a lift back here. I thought he'd be first but his bike is still where we hid it by the road."

"We'd better tell David and Tom at once," Jenny said. "I'll come with you. The twins and Mackie have gone up the hill again to spy on the Manor and the well and see what's happening, but they've promised to be quick. David and Tom have managed to get that awful old punt to the bank and are trying to mend it. They say they can but I hope they don't 'cos I wouldn't dare get in it - ever. Now tell me what the doctor said."

The two boys were working on the punt with the few tools which Tom always brought with him when he went camping, but they looked up at Peter's peewit call. David ran to meet them with a hammer still in his hand.

"What did the doctor say, Pete? How are you?"

"All right, thanks, and I'm all stitched up but I've lost Nicholas. I must tell you all about it quickly because I'm worried. Jenny says that nothing special has happened here."

Tom sauntered up in time to hear the last remark.

"Oh, yes, it has. David hit my finger with his hammer, but we're glad to see you, Peter. You look better already."

She told her story again.

"I really am worried about Nicholas and can't think what has happened to him. I didn't want him in the surgery with me and he said he'd wait for me on the bridge," she finished. "I'm beginning to hate this adventure because things keep happening which we can't explain. What can have happened to him?"

Before David could answer they heard Macbeth's bark of welcome and the twins came running into the camp.

"Hullo, Peter," Dickie puffed. "Have you had a noperation or anything? Oh, good. We've got some vital news. If you want anything found out just you ask us. We'll do it for you... Why are you all looking so serious? What's happened?"

"Nicholas has disappeared," David said shortly. "We're worried. Have you seen him?"

Mary sat down on the grass beside Peter and gave her an affectionate smile.

"No, we haven't," she said. "We'll tell you first what we did and what we've seen and then you must tell us about Nicky. We spied on the Manor from the top of the hill but nothing special is happening except that they're still bashing down the back of the house. After a bit we thought we would try and find a place where we could spy on the house and see the old well 'cos we saw those two men go there last night. It wasn't easy 'cos we were a bit scared of that foreman who lives most of the time in the hut where they make the tea. Of course, we were very cunning and we squirmed about on our bellies - and you needn't look at us like that, Tom, 'cos that's a perfectly good word and if you don't know what it means we'll have to tell you presently! Anyway, we found some bushes not far from the well. We couldn't see much of the house but we could see the drive and after a bit a big lorry came up it and stopped not very far from us. The two men we saw last night got out and hurried across to the well."

They were all listening to her so intently that they forgot to watch for intruders.

"Let me go on now, twin," Dickie begged. "All listen, and don't interrupt. We watched them go to the well and although we couldn't hear what they said we could see that they were *absolutely livid* about something, and we think it was because the water in the well was just as high as it was before they started trying to empty it-----"

"I bet it was," David said grimly. "I bet they were mad. They didn't see you, did they?"

Dickie gulped. "Acksherley they did," he admitted. "Mackie got a bit excited and barked and that disgustin' old Pudding Face looked up and saw us and shouted something very rude and came gallumping after us, but we jus' ran an' ran an' he couldn't keep up, an' we didn't come straight back here but we fooled him, you see, an' here we are."

A long silence followed this recital and then Macbeth barked again and dashed forward. They looked up to see Blandish, his fat, pale face beaded with sweat standing a few feet away with an iron bar in his hand.

"If you don't call that dog off, I'll brain him," he said softly as he raised the bar. "Call him off and hold him fast."

David stood up and called Macbeth who was snarling round his enemy's heels. At the second call Macbeth obeyed reluctantly.

"Now listen carefully," the man went on. "You've been warned and I've no more time to waste. You've lost young Whiteflower. If you want to see him again soon and take him back to that old aunt of his you'll do as I say. Pack up and clear out of here, and when I know you've really gone we'll see about the boy..."

Peter and Tom jumped to their feet while the twins stood open-mouthed in fear and astonishment.

"How do you know that Nicholas is missing?" Peter began impetuously, and then stopped in sudden realization that she had admitted that he was! The amazing thing was that he *did* know.

Tom understood this, too, but he was more direct.

"You've got a nerve, you great fat bully! How do you know where Nicholas Whiteflower is? You've gone too far this time. Have you kidnapped him? I bet you have. Now we all know where we are, and we're going straight to the nearest telephone to fetch the police. Will you go, David, or shall I?"

But David was standing miserably in front of Blandish looking at the ground. He seemed to have lost his spirit and his leadership. He glanced unhappily at Peter and Jenny and shook his head slightly, almost as if he were beaten.

Peter flushed with humiliation.

"David!" she pleaded. "Please, David! Don't you see that we must tell the police now and, anyway, this bully can't make us leave here if we don't wish to do so."

"I'll go, then," Tom said. "You two girls and the twins stay with David. Don't go until I come back. And don't worry about this chap. He only hits little dogs with iron bars. He won't touch any of you. He's just threatening us. Maybe he doesn't even know where Nicholas is."

"Don't go, Tom," David said shakily. "Please don't go without us. Surely you can all see that we must leave here now?" He turned his back to Blandish and grimaced at them. "Surely you all understand that we're responsible for Nicholas? There's something going on round here that we don't understand, and although we're doing no harm here, we shall have to go if that's the only way we can get Nicholas back..." Then, while his friends gazed at him in silent astonishment, he turned back to Blandish. "Where's Nicholas Whiteflower, sir?"

There was something so pathetic and so unlike David in this last appeal that Peter could not check her tears of anger and pity. Never before in all their

wonderful friendship had she ever thought of him as a coward. She turned away and Mary, crying also, took her hand.

Blandish stepped forward.

"Glad you've seen sense at last," he sneered. "When I'm satisfied that you've cleared out of Bringewood for good I'll find young Whiteflower and send him after you."

"How do we know you'll keep your promise?" Jenny said hotly.

"You don't. You'll have to trust me. You don't know where the kid is but I do. How do you know that this Whiteflower brat hasn't walked off and left you all because he was sick of playing around with you? I wouldn't trust him as far as I could see him, but his old aunt is going to be very angry with you lot. You're responsible for him, aren't you?"

Peter was amazed that David didn't threaten the bully by telling him that they could easily telephone Mr. Morton and Mr. Harman, either of whom could be with them in an hour or so. She pleaded with him again. "Surely you see, David, that all he says may be lies. We can't trust him. He's nothing but a coward and a-----"

"Shut up, Peter," David snapped. "Start packing up the camp. We're going. We can't do anything else. I'm responsible for Nicholas," and he turned to the nearest tent and began to loosen the guy ropes.

Blandish shrugged. "Got some sense into you at last. It's taken long enough. Now listen carefully, boy. David, I mean. You can wait for me on the bridge at Bringewood Chase at seven o'clock tonight. Send the rest of your Sunday School Treat home, wherever that is. Get out and stay out, and keep that dog off if you want to keep it alive," and he strode off swinging the iron bar in a horrid silence.

Then Mary sobbed and put into words what they were all thinking. "Oh, David! How could you?"

"Get moving," David muttered. "Pull up the tents. Pack up everything. When he turns round he's got to see us busy."

Sure enough, when he reached the end of the little track leading to the meadow, Blandish turned and watched them.

"Get busy, you fools," David snapped. "I know you want to blow your top off, Tom, but show him I meant what I said."

Tom looked at him in dawning comprehension and rushed at another tent and began to get it down. Blandish, apparently satisfied, turned and strode across the meadow towards the bridge.

Then David - the old David they knew so well - looked up from his work and laughed.

"What a lot of idiots you are! What a loyal lot of Lone Piners! We're not going to leave the gorge. We're going to pack up here and find another camp and watch those two nasty types, and discover that necklace for the Whiteflowers, too. We'll find Nicholas. Can't you see that we had to put him off the scent? As soon as he sees us go, they'll be off their guard at the well, then there really will be a chance for us to find out something."

Peter went up to him impulsively. "I'm sorry, David. I'm ashamed not to have trusted you. I feel an absolute worm and I can't say more, can I?"

David, laughing now - and to laugh was an effort with his bruised face and black eye - put an arm round her shoulders and gave her a quick hug. "Let's all forget it. I'm not a bad actor, am I? Quick as you can, now. Get everything packed and let's get out."

"But Nicholas?" Jenny quavered. "What about poor Nicky? Has he really been kidnapped? And where shall we go and how shall we move all this stuff? We had Dad and Mr. Morton to help us before."

While they struck camp, David told them his plans. He believed that Nicholas was somewhere in the village and that Pudding Face and possibly his accomplice must live there. He felt sure that Nicholas had been tricked

and then captured and suggested that Jenny, Tom and the twins should go to Bringewood on their bikes and make more enquiries than Peter had been able to do earlier.

"I've had another idea, too," David went on. The punt is more or less O.K. now, and we found the paddle we dropped in the river yesterday. I know Tom and I couldn't paddle the beastly thing upstream against the current, but I think we might use this punt just for crossing the river. It will be useful for carrying all our stuff. We've got about twenty feet of rope so I suggest we try and tow it upstream as far as the aqueduct, and then we'll try and moor it on the Manor side of the river under the trees where Tom and I found it. Let's carry everything over the bridge and then try and get the punt through before it's loaded. That will be the tricky bit. Once we've got it through there, the force of water higher up won't be so bad. Are you all game? Shall we try?"

They would have done anything he asked them now. Half an hour later they had their bikes, rolled-up tents and bedding and their haversacks on the other side of the bow bridge. After a struggle with the punt, Tom and David managed, without much difficulty, to tow it through the shallows, but the force of the water surging through the arch was almost too much for them because their rope was not very long. They managed to get the punt close in to the bank and hauled it, inch by inch, up to the little beach under the arch opposite to where the girls had searched yesterday. Peter and Jenny were waiting here and the combined strength of four of them got it through. The twins were waiting on the path and took the end of the rope, while David edged the unwieldy punt alongside the stonework of the bridge against which the water was rushing before it poured through the narrow arch. The punt was held broadside against this by the force of the water and, praying that the tow-rope would not snap, they scrambled one by one up the bank, hauled the punt straight and without much more trouble loaded it and towed it up to the aqueduct, mooring it to the trunk of a willow tree growing on the bank.

Then the twins, Tom and Jenny went back for all the bicycles while Peter and David were left wondering how they were going to get the punt hidden

on the other side of the river. David showed her where they had found it, about fifty yards downstream from where they were sitting.

"Trouble is, Pete, we've only got one paddle. Tom and I weren't much good with two of them and one of them broke in my hand. I think I know more about the beastly punt now, but do we dare risk trying to cross the river on our own? We might finish up where we did yesterday!"

"We won't, David. I'll swim with the tow-rope and you guide the brute with a paddle. We'll get over. Chuck up my haversack. It won't take me a sec to change."

David protested in vain about her knee. He wasn't too keen but knew that she was a much better swimmer than he was and he thought her idea was a sensible one. He was very worried about Nicholas, and knew that they must hide their equipment and find a site for a new camp as soon as possible. So by the time the others arrived with all the bicycles Peter, stuffing her hair under her scarlet bathing cap, came down to the bank and tossed her haversack and towel into the punt.

"If you find Nicholas, come back here as soon as you can and give the peewit call," David said to the others as he handed Peter the end of the rope. "If you haven't found a clue in three hours don't wait longer but come back. One or both of us will be hiding somewhere near and waiting for you. This punt is an awful nuisance, but we mustn't use the bow bridge if we can help it because we can be seen there from the top of the hill. I think they're busy at the well, but I wouldn't mind betting that somebody has gone back to our camp site to see if we've really gone."

"That's O.K.," Tom said. "We'll find Nicholas because if we don't there'll be plenty of trouble and we shall have to telephone Barton and Witchend. We're not going until we see you two safe on the other side of the river. Good luck, Peter. Cheerio, David. Rather you than me with that paddle."

Peter turned and smiled at them. "Good luck to you, too. You must find Nicholas. I asked for him in the shops on the main street, Tom, but there aren't many. We know he bought some bread at the baker's and you'd better buy some, too, else we shall starve. All right, David? We've got a good

audience so let's get it over. I dare not dive because the rope will pull me back."

David nodded, let go, grabbed his paddle and pushed off the stern of the punt as Peter slipped into the water and struck out for the opposite bank. The bows of the punt swung round as the current took it and David used the paddle as a rudder.

"Hide our bikes in the bushes over there somewhere," he called. "We may want them in a hurry... See you soon, I hope."

The others waved and watched anxiously. They needn't have worried because Peter had little trouble in guiding the punt across the stream with David doing all he could to check its speed.

"Peter's O.K. in the water," Tom said admiringly.

"O.K.?" Jenny protested. "She's marvellous. Look! They're over now. David's pointing to something. Is that where the punt was hidden when you found it, Tom?"

"That's it. Nobody will see it from this side unless they climb a tree like I did. They're O.K. Come on."

David, now fifty yards downstream, turned and waved his paddle in salutation and then Peter disappeared under a screen of bushes.

Tom and Jenny hid the two spare bicycles in the undergrowth, and then the four of them pushed their own up the track to the road.

"Darling Mackie will have to ride in his basket," Mary said, as she lifted the little dog into the basket fixed behind her saddle. "Let's hurry now and find this village."

None of them had seen Bringewood Chase before, but as there didn't seem to be very much of it Tom suggested that they should leave their bikes under the trees by the bus stop. "We'll split up," he said. "Mary with me and Dickie with Jenny and each pair take one side of the High Street - if they

call it a High Street? Peter said there weren't many shops, but we must ask in each one again."

"Shall we ask for Nicholas by name?" Jenny asked. "I s'pose everyone in this village knows him by sight."

Tom agreed, but hesitated when Dickie asked why they didn't go to the local policeman and ask for help.

"Not yet, Dickie. We may have to do that if we can't find him by ourselves, but once we tell the police, everything would have to be told and we should have to leave the gorge and everybody would be mad with us."

"O.K.! O.K., pard. It's just that I'm a'gettin' a bit bored with those ole shiners-----"

"Shiners, twin? What's that?"

"Diamonds, sister. Jus' diamonds... Come on, Jenny. Let's find young Nicholas afore it rains. Weather is lookin' a bit dirty to me."

So it was. It was still hot, but the sky was overcast and way over the blue hills of Wales to the south-west the storm clouds were gathering. Macbeth walked dejectedly beside Mary with his tail down and his tongue out. He didn't really think much of this adventure.

It was Dickie who found the clue they needed, though he admitted later that he had been lucky. The bus from Ludlow arrived and a woman with a loaded string bag got out, passed them with a smile and went into the butcher's shop a few yards ahead.

"She's got a lucky face," Jenny whispered. "Let's ask in the butcher's. Oh, look! Tom has gone over to ask the bus driver. That's clever. Tom is very clever, you know, Dickie." Dickie nodded solemnly and went into the shop.

"*Good* afternoon, sir," he began. "What wonderful meat you have today. And good afternoon to you, madam, if it's not too late, if you know what I mean. Acksherley, we don't happen to want any meat at this minute. We've

lost our friend, Nicholas Whiteflower. I expect you know him. We've been camping with him an'..."

The butcher stopped sharpening his knife on the steel which hung from his waist.

"Bless me," he said. "There was a strange girl - pretty girl she was an' all - in here this very morning asking for that boy. I heard tell he's gone over Stiperstones way with Miss Whiteflower to stay for a while, but I've not seen the lad. What's fuss about?"

Before either of them could answer, the woman with the string bag overwhelmed them with words. She knew Nicholas. It was a shame about the Whiteflowers. How was the poor lamb? It was all wrong to knock down the Manor. Yes, she had seen him this very morning. While waiting for the bus to move off she saw him speak to the driver of a housebreakers' lorry which had pulled up in the shade of the trees. No. The driver was not wearing a black beret and Nicholas got into the cab with him.

"And I'll tell you something, my dears. That lorry calls every day at Blandish's inn. Down Sun Lane, it is, and it's called the *Two Bells*, I was thinking to myself this very day I was thinking that Blandish seems to be mighty interested in the Manor now that it's being knocked down, but I was wondering why young Master Nicholas should be in that lorry-----"

She was still talking when Jenny and Dickie, after thanking her for her help, were out on the pavement waving frantically to Tom and Mary who came running over to them. They were all excited at the news and agreed that they should find the *Two Bells* at once.

Then, at the end of Sun Lane they met Syd Blandish in his check shirt and tight black trousers. Syd didn't look at all well. His face was puffy, his nose red and rather a peculiar shape and his lips swollen. He was indeed much, much uglier than usual, and for a moment he looked as if he would like to run away. Mackie, of course, would have been only too delighted to have helped him, but once again his mistress grabbed him by the scruff of the neck as Jenny, so quickly that she surprised herself, said, "Hullo. Fancy seeing you here. I'm glad we have met you 'cos we don't know our way in

this village and we're on our way home. Our bikes are down there under the trees."

He blinked his puffy eyes and ran his tongue over his swollen lips. Tom was quick to see what was in Jenny's mind.

"Matter of fact we're clearing out," he admitted, trying to look miserable and defeated. "We've had enough of it here, haven't we, Jenny? We're fed up."

"Oh, yes, we are, Tom. Absolutely, vitally fed up. I can't stand all this fighting. It's rather nice meeting you actually 'cos I wanted to say how brave I thought you were yesterday."

Syd looked at her suspiciously. She was a pretty girl in an ordinary sort of way with her red hair and grey eyes. Just for a second he wondered whether she was trying to be funny, but she looked at him so admiringly that he wondered whether he had misjudged some of these kids.

"I'm sick of camping," she went on. "Sick of all this trouble. It's so silly, isn't it? Everybody ought to be friends, and that reminds me. Have you seen our friend Nicholas? The fair boy. We've lost him, but p'raps he's got tired of us. You never know, do you?"

Syd blinked and gulped. None of this made sense and he was further put out when Mary, the girl twin, said, "Never, never in all our lives have we seen such a *beautiful*, expensive shirt as yours. Do tell me where you got it. I'd like to save up and buy one like it for my big brother who is bringing lots of stuff up from the gorge now. He's very busy. He has to be, in our family."

Then Jenny said, "Where's that *beautiful* girl you were with? I bet she thinks you're wonderful."

Tom smiled - not a very natural smile - at this reference to girl-friends and said, "Well, cheerio. Shan't see you again, I suppose. Come on, you lot. We've got plenty to do before meeting the others."

The twins and Jenny took the hint and followed him along the pavement while Syd turned and ran back down Sun Lane.

"Now," Tom said. "One of you. See where he goes, but don't let him see you."

Mary peered round the corner.

"I think we're lucky," she squeaked. "I *think* he's gone into an inn. It must be the *Two Bells*. And that woman said the *Two Bells* belongs to a man called Blandish who was interested in the Manor. P'raps Blandish is our Pudding Face and p'raps this ghastly Syd is his dear little boy?"

Tom agreed. "We've got to be quick. Maybe they've tricked Nicholas into that pub. D'you remember that Blandish knew he was missing when he came to the camp this morning? You all wait about here while I run down and have a look round. No sense in us all going. We look like a circus. If Syd comes out and sees me I'll think of something to say. While you're waiting do try and look natural and you could buy some bread, too. Cheerio!"

He was back, wildly excited, in ten minutes - the longest ten minutes they had ever known.

The pub is closed, but I've found Nicholas. He's a prisoner in a room at the back. He saw me, but signalled that he can't open the window. There's a ladder in the yard, but I'm not sure that it will reach. Come on. We've got to be quick. You twins go to the front and keep whoever is in there busy. Say you want to buy some ginger-beer or something. I hurried past the window of the bar and saw Syd in there with a woman. P'raps it's Mrs. Blandish? Keep them quiet while we try and get Nicky out through the window. When we are lucky we'll give the peewit call and you try and lock those two in. We've got to get back to the gorge as quickly as we can without them seeing us. Don't forget your bikes. We'll look after Nicky, but I shall have to take him on my cross-bar. We must get back to the gorge without these Blandishes knowing where we've gone. They've got to believe we've left the district. Don't let Mackie make a fool of himself."

Mary gave him a glare of hatred for his final remark and then with her twin raced down Sun Lane ahead of the others.

It so happened that the rescue of the kidnapped Nicholas was almost as simple as Tom's plan. The twins peeped through the window and saw Syd arguing with a handsome, black-haired woman wearing big rings in her ears, whom they recognized at once as the woman who had warned them away from the camp. They banged at the door till Syd opened it and told them to go away, but they were inside with Mackie before he realized what had happened. They pushed past the angry Mrs. Blandish into the bar, and asked for bottles of ginger-beer and packets of crisps because they were going on a long journey. They said they were going home and that they hated the gorge and they thanked Mrs. Blandish for warning them. They never stopped talking either separately or both together; they refused to be intimidated or put out. They flattered Syd, told his mother that they wished they could stay at the *Two Bells* and said they both disliked Nicholas.

Then Dickie thought he heard a tinkle of breaking glass, so he went behind the bar and switched on the radio. He noticed a key in the lock of a door leading to the kitchen, so while Mary was engaging the attention of their enemies he locked it and slipped the key in his pocket. Soon after they heard the peewit's call outside in the street. Dickie glanced at his twin who sidled to the door into the stone-flagged passage and looked meaningly at the big key in the lock. Dickie then pointed to the bar counter and when the Blandishes turned he flung an ash-tray at the bottles, and dashed out, locking the door behind him. A few seconds later the twins were running triumphantly up Sun Lane as Tom and Nicholas turned into the High Street.

Twenty minutes later they reached the track that led to the gorge.

Tom and Jenny had had a struggle with the heavy ladder, and when they did get it against the wall of the house it was a few feet short of the sill of Nicholas' prison. But they had to risk it. While Jenny stood on the bottom rung, Tom climbed up and signalled to Nicholas to smash the glass from inside when they had got out of the way. When they had retreated to a safe distance, Nicholas smashed the bottom pane of the sash window with a chair. Tom then climbed up again, encouraged Nicholas to get backwards out of the window and let himself down so that Tom could guide his feet on

to the top rung. The rest was easy, except that Tom insisted that they should take down the ladder and put it back where they had found it.

Nicholas, riding on the cross-bar of Tom's bike, did not have a chance to say much except that he knew he'd been silly! When Peter was in the surgery he had seen and recognized the housebreakers' lorry and thinking to be clever had asked the driver if he knew a man who looked like the description he gave him of Pudding Face. The driver had said that he did and knew where he lived and that he would show him. He seemed friendly enough, but as soon as he was in the cab of the lorry Nicholas knew he had made a mistake. They drove straight to the *Two Bells* and the driver yanked Nicholas out and pushed him into the hall. He had no chance because Blandish and the man in the brown suit were standing there evidently waiting for the lorry.

"Must say they seemed surprised to see me," Nicholas admitted. "I tried to fight, but it was no use. They shoved me in that filthy little bedroom, but Sydney and the woman gave me plenty to eat. I made a row on the door and they threatened to tie me up. I couldn't open the window from inside and if I'd bust the glass I was too high up to jump. They told me to behave myself and I'd be all right, but I'd never have thought I could be such a fool... Is Peter better?"

"She should be waiting for us in the punt right now," Jenny explained. "She's much better and we hope it didn't hurt her knee to swim across the river before we came to find you. We're making a new camp."

They hid their bicycles and ran down to the river. There was no punt, but as they stood on the bank the bushes on the opposite side by the aqueduct parted and Peter's fair head appeared.

"Jolly good to have got Nicky," she called softly. "Listen... We can't get the punt across against the current. All go up to the bow bridge and cross it one at a time, making sure that you're not being spied on from anywhere - specially from the hill. David will meet you once you're over, but don't make a sound. We've been lucky! Cheerio," and she disappeared.

Tom led the way along the track they now knew so well. They all realized that Peter and David must have found a new and secret camp and that the most exciting part of their adventure was still to come.

What they did not know was that a fair girl in scarlet jeans had followed them from the village on her bicycle, and was standing on the path by the aqueduct watching them hurrying in the direction of the bow bridge.

11. The Cave

Peter pulled herself out of the water and stood dripping on the bank, as David guided the punt through the screen of bushes into the little secret harbour. Then she untied the rope from her wrist and fastened it round the trunk of the tree from which Tom had seen Syd Blandish and the girl Marilyn hurrying along the track on their way to break up their camp.

"Throw up my haversack, David. I'm cold and must get some clothes on."

She was back in a few minutes. "It's like the jungle. There's not a sign of a path and hardly room to stand on one foot. I can't see how we're going to find a camping place. What do you want to do next?"

"I want to talk to you, Peter. Sit down here for five minutes. I'll tell you what I haven't said to any of the others. If they don't find Nicholas within the next three hours we've lost the game and shall have to telephone for the parents. You agree, don't you?"

"I suppose so," she said doubtfully. "I like Nicky, but it is just possible that he's had enough of us all and gone back to Barton Beach by himself. It doesn't sound likely, but he's not used to people like us. I don't mean that to sound conceited. It's just that we're all used to each other and when we squabble we don't really mean it. But he doesn't seem to have any friends, and you remember he was very anti-us at first. No, David. Maybe I'm not being fair to him. He was nicer than he's ever been this morning and wanted to come into the surgery with me as if I was about ten."

"P'raps he's on to something for us," David said, charitably. "What worries me is that we're responsible for him. Anyway, suppose the others find him in the village and get back here soon? Suppose that problem is settled? We've still got to know what those two men are doing at the well. We must know what they're after and that's what I want us to do now. We've got to spy on them without being suspected. Somehow we've got to get out of this jungle and up the cliff, which isn't nearly as steep on this side."

"You think Harriet hid the necklace on this side of the river, don't you, David?"

"Yes, I do. Remember, there was a terrific storm, and I'm sure that when the river floods the water rises so fast in the gorge that it would be difficult for anybody to use the path. I don't think she would have hidden it in the ruined mill or cottage unless she knew the people who lived there. I suppose Miss Whiteflower would have told us if anything was known about them?"

"I suppose so," Peter agreed.

"I've got a hunch that we're now on the right side of the river," David went on. "I don't think Harriet hid the necklace under the bridge because if the water was high she couldn't even get near the arch."

"She might have tried, and been swept away in the darkness. Anyway, David, I know you want to see what those men are doing. Let's go and spy on them first and on our way we must find a place to camp. We can't all sleep in that punt."

With David in the lead they forced their way through the undergrowth towards the cliffs. Progress was very slow because there was no track.

"Maybe we shall have to sleep in the punt after all," Peter gasped. "We'll never find a place to camp here. How are you going to get me up that cliff, David?"

"We'll find a way, if I have to haul you up on the tow-rope," he said. "I'm sorry about all this, Peter, but I'm sure I remember a little wood on the top here and not far from the well. We dare not go round by the bridge in case we're seen. Once we know where they are, and what they're all doing, we may be able to take more risks. Take it easy and hang on to me because I think I can see a way up."

Peter tried not to let him see that her knee was hurting again as they struggled up a shelving slope of rubble. Step by step, with several rests for Peter, and by clinging to the trunks of some of the trees, they fought their way up to the top and flopped exhausted on the stony ground of a little

wood. Peter lay back with her hands behind her head and wondered if David could hear the thumping of her heart. He said nothing for a minute or two and in the silence she thought she heard the murmur of distant voices.

"Stay here, Pete," said David at last. I'm going to crawl through this wood and find out where we are. I believe we're close to the well, and I'd like to get as near as I can if those characters are still there. Once we know what they're doing we'll see if we can find a place to camp in this wood. I'm sure it's not very deep, but I believe it stretches right the way from the bow bridge to the aqueduct. You don't mind staying here, do you?"

Peter sat up. "I mind very much, but I shall have to stay because I'm not in a crawling mood. Be as quick as you can, David. I'm worried about the others and most particularly about Nicholas and I'm *absolutely fed up* with my knee... Go on, but please be quick."

Fifteen minutes seemed like an hour before she heard the soft whistle of the peewit's call. She replied, realizing that he was trying to find her, and a few seconds later he came quietly but quickly through the trees.

"No need to crawl," he laughed as he sat down beside her. "They're both at the well and so interested in what they're doing that they've no time to look over here. Listen, Pete. I couldn't hear what they were saying from the edge of the wood, but I spotted a clump of bushes at the side of a little gully that was much closer to them. There are several of these gullies between the well and the trees, so I chanced it and crawled up and hid behind the bushes."

"Go on, David. What are they doing and what did they say?"

David chuckled. "They're in a filthy mess and a filthy temper. I'll tell you quickly because we must find a camping place. As we guessed, it's Pudding Face and the old man in the brown tweed suit who I think is the boss. Anyway, they're both in their shirt sleeves and they're both working the winch and bringing up buckets and emptying the water into a gutter they've dug. *They're trying to empty the well, Pete, but I'm sure they'll never do it by themselves.* Anyway, I could hear what they were saying from behind the bushes and the language was awful. The old man kept telling Pudding Face

that he wasn't working hard enough, and that they'd never get the level of the water down unless he really tried. Then P.F. lost his temper and let go of the winch handle and the big bucket went down with such a splash that you would have heard it here if you hadn't been asleep."

"I was *not*, David. Go on. Did they say anything that might help us?"

"Yes, they did. When the bucket was down, P.F. stood up to the older man and said that they ought to ask the foreman of the breakdown gang, whose name is Bates, to lend them a pump so that they could suck the water out quicker than it came in. Then the other chap said, in rather a peculiar sort of accent, "Why should we share the treasure with anybody else? Two's enough, ain't it? I've paid Bates enough already, just to keep quiet and do what he's told. I've paid his men, too, and you know that was worth while because one of them was smart enough to grab the Whiteflower kid this morning... Trouble is, you won't work hard enough yourself, Simon-----" Yes, I remember now. He called P.F., Simon... Anyway, this Simon flew into a fearful rage at this and came charging round the well and slipped and fell on his face in the mud... Of course, it was funny, Peter. This Simon had to spit the mud out of his mouth, and then he sort of screamed that he didn't believe and never had believed that any woman would be such a fool as to throw a valuable diamond necklace down a well.

"Now, Pete. This is the really important thing. The old man, whose name is Harry, then lost his temper and began to shout. I could hear them easily and he said, "Don't be such a fool. You didn't know Harriet Brown, but I did. I've met her here at this well many a time, and I reckon it's a place she'd come back to when she was in trouble. How many times do I have to remind you that those kids got hold of a letter from Harriet to me? I heard them reading it out. Heard it all and the last words were, "I shall hide it where the water..." *Quit spitting out that mud over me, Simon...* Can't you see that if she finished that letter she might have said 'where the water is in the deep well'?"

"Simon spat again and said, "She was so crazy that she might have said what she didn't mean, and you're just about as silly, Harry. We're wasting our time here. We should have taken it out of those kids until they told us what they know and showed us the letter. We've been soft about this

business from the beginning. Either we make Bill Bates get us a pump, or I go back and make that brat Whiteflower talk. He knows something that we don't, I swear."

"That's the way they were talking, Peter, but they're in such a rage that they don't seem to know what they're doing. They yelled at each other and then started hauling up the buckets again, but we really do know more about them now than we did. The bits of the jigsaw are beginning to fit, aren't they?"

Peter patted him on the back.

"Yes, they are. Good idea of yours to get close enough to hear. We can be fairly sure that Nicky has been kidnapped by Pudding Face, who must surely live in the village, so the others have got a chance of finding him. But, of course, the vital thing, as Jenny would call it, is that we know that the awful old man in the tweed suit was the man who made Harriet steal the diamonds, and then went off so that he would never be suspected... I don't believe I've ever heard of anybody so downright wicked. I'd like to push him down the well. Where's he been all these years? Why has he come back now, and what has he got to do with Pudding Face? I wish I'd seen him fall in the mud, David! Don't you sometimes wonder how anybody could be so horrible and greedy as those two? Let's get this business over as soon as we can and go back to Witchend. There is something I don't like about this gorge. The gypsies were right. Perhaps there's a sort of remembrance of wickedness about it? I'm sorry. I s'pose I'm talking nonsense. What shall we do? I'd like to get back to the gorge ready for the others."

"We must find a place to camp, but we dare not put the tents up in this wood," David replied. "It's too close to the enemy and they'd smell the smoke of a camp fire. Let's explore the wood next, though, just to see if we can find a good place. We'll go towards the bridge first and then work back past here to the aqueduct."

Carefully, in single file, they made their way through the narrow belt of trees between the Whiteflower meadow and the gorge. Although the ground was now hard and dry they could see that several little streams drained the meadows which, at this end, sloped quite steeply down to the wood.

Through the years the running water had made for itself a series of little ravines which were deeper under the trees. They climbed in and out of two of these dry ditches and then, to their surprise, came to a much deeper and wider one down which a stream of muddy water was flowing.

"That's odd," David whispered. "This stream must be fed by a spring that hasn't dried up, but why is the water muddy?"

"Maybe it's something to do with your poor eye, but you're getting dull, David! I'll bet that this is where the overflow water from the well runs out. Look! It's running clear now although there's not much of it. Wait till they empty some more buckets and then it will come rushing down again."

"Of course! You're right, Peter. We should be just about opposite the well now and I saw that they'd dug a ditch which could lead into the bed of this stream. Let's wait and see what happens."

Peter sat down thankfully. The grass was soft and although the sun was no longer shining the smell of wet soil was very welcome. The silence of the wood was broken only by the tinkle of the water. David straddled the stream and cocked his head towards the meadow.

Suddenly he turned with a broad grin to Peter.

"Here it comes! They're still working!" and as he spoke, another gush of muddy water swept between his legs. "Let's follow it down and see where it runs into the river. This could be quite a stream in normal weather and maybe it will show us an easy way up and down the cliff."

Peter agreed and again David took the lead and followed the stream downhill. The ravine deepened, and if it had been wider would have provided them with a good, secret camping place. The undergrowth was very thick, however, and it was impossible to see more than a yard or two ahead. Suddenly, with a cry of surprise David disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him up. Indeed, it nearly had, for when Peter leaned forward and peered through the bush growing across the stream, she saw David lying on his back in a narrow gully into which the stream was splashing from a height of about four feet.

"Are you all right, David?"

He got up slowly. His slacks were wet through and he looked dazed.

"I s'pose so. That was too sudden to be amusing. Don't come down for a sec, Pete. I'll see where the stream goes, but it sounds as if it's running into a pipe."

She watched him move forward slowly and then go down on his hands and knees. When he turned, his voice was hoarse with excitement.

"It runs into a cave, Peter. I swear it does. The entrance is partly blocked by a big stone but I can hear the stream dropping quite a long way. It sounds hollow. Wait a sec, and I'll help you down, but be careful not to leave a trail that shows we've come this way."

He helped her down. The gully was only about three feet wide and eight feet long. At the far end, where the water disappeared underground, they were faced by a huge limestone rock. When Peter looked round wonderingly it was almost as if they were standing in a stone-walled grave.

"Listen, Pete," David whispered. Put your head down by that big stone and you'll hear the hollow noise of the stream running through a tunnel or cave. Look down over the top of it and tell me what you see."

She tried to keep the weight off her injured knee as she crouched down where David pointed. There was certainly a tunnel under the rock into which the stream was running round the big stone which partially blocked the entrance. The tunnel was nearly vertical, but as Peter looked down she realized that if the stone was not there it would be wide enough for somebody slim to crawl down into the cave.

"What can you see?" David urged.

"Nothing but a sort of grey light."

"That's it. That proves it. There's a cave down there with another entrance or shaft letting in daylight."

"We might be able to squeeze down this way, David, but we should have to move the stone and I s'pose we ought to get a rope and a torch."

"Look out!" David shouted suddenly. "Here's some more water coming, so they're still busy at the well," and he put his hands round her waist and pulled her up as another surge of water fell into the pit, swirled over their feet, piled up for a moment or two against the stone and then crashed into the cave. When its force had subsided again, David said thoughtfully, "We won't try to move the stone yet. I think we must be close to the edge of the cliff here and the light we saw inside may come from another entrance. You stay here and I'll climb up and explore over the top of this rock."

He hauled himself out of the gully and disappeared.

Peter crouched down again and tried to persuade herself that she could see the floor of a cave below her, but really there was nothing more than the patch of mysterious grey light that might yet prove David's point. As she watched, it seemed that the quality of this light changed - there was more of it - and then, above the noise of the falling water, a booming voice called her name.

"Peter! Can you hear me? I've found a wonderful cave! Shout if you can hear me."

"Yes, David. I'm here. Come up this end and tell me."

His answer was closer.

"Good! You must see it for yourself, Pete. We've found exactly what we were looking for. Wait there and I'll come and haul you out."

He was back in a few minutes and she had rarely seen him so excited as he jumped into the gully beside her. "The luck's turned for us, Peter. The cave's big enough for us all to sleep in, and the entrance is hidden by bushes growing below a rocky ledge where I suppose we could risk a fire for cooking. We can see across the gorge from there, and it looks as if there may be a fairly easy way down to the river, by the stream which runs down a little channel at the side of the cave and then down to the gorge. We can

camp here, I'm sure, and keep a sentry at the edge of the wood to watch them at the well. Now, Pete. How are we going to get you out of here without hurting your knee?"

She hated feeling so helpless because she was determined to do all that David asked of her. He jumped down beside her and without argument put his arms round her waist and raised her so that she was able to lift herself out of the gully without putting any strain on the knee. He was soon up beside her again and led the way round the big rock, under some bushes and out on to a ledge about four feet wide, over the edge of which the stream ran in a narrow channel before falling into the gorge below.

"Mind your head when you go in, Peter. The roof isn't very high, but you'll see that the cave is big enough to shelter us all. Trouble is that it's rather dark. Nobody will find us here unless we give ourselves away by leaving a trail. Here comes some more water, they're still working. Go inside the cave and see for yourself. We'll have to get the others over here as soon as we can."

"If they've found Nicholas," Peter said. "We seem to have forgotten him."

David stayed outside on the ledge while she went into the cave. It was, as he had said, a perfect secret camp, although they would obviously be very cramped for eating and sleeping if they all crowded inside together. The floor was dry and smooth, and a steady current of air, coming through the opening at the top where the stream ran in from the gully, kept the inside very sweet. Through the years, the running water had cut for itself quite a deep channel in the soft limestone along one side of the cave, but Peter noticed little piles of dry sticks and rubbish which suggested that when the stream was full of flood water it would surely flow right over the floor of the cave. But it was a wonderful hiding place which they were lucky to have found.

"The only trouble will be getting up and down here from the gorge, David," she said as she backed out on to the ledge. "When the others come - if they've got Nicholas, of course - they'll all have to take a share of carrying the stuff up here. Let's go down now and see if there's any sign of them."

David led the way down to the river by keeping as close as possible to the falling water of their stream. It was steep, but not too difficult, and had the advantage of being hidden from the other side of the gorge. They had to struggle back some distance towards the aqueduct to the punt, which David wanted to unpack at once.

"But we'll have to put all our stuff back again if the others haven't found Nicholas," Peter protested. "We shall have to let the grown-ups know then. I feel sure he's been kidnapped and he'd never have gone back to Barton without leaving a message for us. There's something happening to the weather, too, David. We're going to have a storm, I'm sure."

David nodded. The air was still and heavy. The sun was hidden behind a menacing haze and when they looked at the river beyond the screen of bushes hiding their little secret harbour, it seemed that the silent water had now some sinister intent as it swirled down towards the bow bridge through the gloomy gorge.

"The current is much stronger," David whispered. "We'll never get the punt across against the stream, shall we? Will you go up as far as the aqueduct on your own, Peter? I'm sure that the others will turn up, and when they do, tell them to go along the track to the bridge and cross over one at a time, making sure that they're not being watched. I'll be hiding under the arch on the other side of the bridge and will have to guide them through what the twins will call the jungle back here so that we can all carry something up to the cave. If they haven't turned up in half an hour we'll meet each other here again and decide what to do. O.K.?"

Peter nodded and five minutes later found a hidden place near the river from which she could see the track between the gorge and the road. As she waited she realized with a shock that although to an extent their luck had turned, there really was something peculiarly depressing about the gorge. There was an air of foreboding about it rather in the same way as the weather now promised something very unpleasant.

In the thick silence of the impending storm she heard the sound of voices. Tom and Jenny, with Nicholas, the twins and Macbeth just behind them were standing on the opposite bank looking round anxiously. So David had

been right and all her forebodings wrong! The Lone Piners had done it again and found Nicholas, and their new friend was certainly more important than any diamond necklace.

She pushed her head through the bushes.

"Hi!" she called as loudly as she dared. "Jolly good to have got Nicky," and then went on to tell them what to do.

Tom led them off without hesitation and Peter went back to the punt and rested there for a few minutes. Suddenly she sensed a movement on the opposite bank and looked up to see the fair girl in the scarlet jeans standing behind a tree looking intently up the track towards the bridge. Peter slid to the ground and lay still. Syd's Marilyn was looking worried and indecisive, but Peter was sure that she had followed the others and now knew that they had not left the gorge in spite of what David had told Blandish this morning. What would she do? Did she know about the two men at the well? Did she know where Nicholas had been before joining the others? Would she follow them to the bridge itself and climb the meadow to the Manor, or join the two villains at their frenzied work at the well? Surely if she went towards the bridge, David and the others would see her, but it would be serious if the girl realized that they were all hiding on this side of the gorge.

Then the problem was decided for them. The swirling waters of the river were suddenly patterned with raindrops, and Peter realized that the storm for which they had been waiting had broken at last. The girl then stepped out on to the path, took a last look towards the bridge and then ran back as fast as she could towards the aqueduct as a great flash of lightning split the sky and the thunder roared. Peter knew that the others must be warned at once, but it was hard work trying to follow the trail that David had left as he forced his way through the undergrowth a quarter of an hour ago.

With another crash of thunder the rain poured down, and a sudden wind roaring in the tree tops filled the gorge with sound. Peter struggled forward until Macbeth squirmed under a bush and jumped up at her, wagging his tail. She stooped to pat him and then the others crowded round her excitedly while she told her story.

They were all as sure as they could be that the girl had not been in or near the *Two Bells* when Nicholas was rescued, but agreed that they were too excited to notice whether they were followed from the time they got on their bicycles in the village street.

"Fancy that!" Tom laughed at Jenny. "If I'd known she was watching us I'd have stayed behind. I wonder what she'll think of Syd when she sees him next? Let's find your cave, David. If we don't hurry we shall get what the twins call utterly saturated. Nice to see you again, Peter. Nicholas has got a wonderful story to tell you."

"It's a tough climb up," David said as he took the lead again. "Try not to leave too clear a trail, because it will be all up with us if they find us now. We'll take the tow-rope off the punt and haul each other up, but everyone - except Peter - must carry up a load."

David led the way up by the falling stream and tied one end of the rope to a tree so that they could all haul themselves up with its help. It took them half an hour to get everything up, but the others were so excited about the cave that they forgot how wet they were.

David told them how Peter and he had found the cave by following the stream down, and then they all crowded in, and made themselves some tea. When they had exchanged stories Tom said, "But we don't know what those two are doing now. For all we know they've emptied the well and found the necklace. Here we are sitting about and guzzling tea and telling each other how clever we are and letting the others get away with it! Is there a way out through the end of this cave where the stream comes in? There's a lot more water coming through now than there was ten minutes ago."

David showed them that the narrow end of the cave would be wide enough for a small adult to crawl through if the big stone partially blocking the entrance were removed. "But we don't want to move it because it controls the flow into the cave. Tom's right, and it's time one of us followed the stream up and tried to find out what those men are doing. I think they're still using the bucket because plenty of muddy water is coming down. I'll go, if you like."

But Tom, who was in a fighting mood, insisted that he would like to go and Jenny, as usual, wanted to go with him.

David told Tom how to follow the stream up to the edge of the wood and warned him about the narrow gully above the cave. "Come back as soon as you can and report, but don't let them see you. You won't be able to hear what they're saying from the edge of the wood but we'd like to know what they're doing. We must watch them all the time and if they go away tonight we'll have a chance to look at the well then. Cheerio. Don't be too long."

Tom and Jenny went carefully up to the edge of the wood. The rain had stopped but the sky was thick with scudding clouds and thunder was rumbling in the distance. A lot of water was flowing down the stream as they hid behind two trees and looked up towards the well.

The first thing they noticed was that there were now four men there, two of whom were working the handle of the sort of pump sometimes used by men who dig holes in roads. They could distinctly hear the clank of the handle and see the water gushing out of the side of the pump and running into the newly dug trench found by David earlier.

"Look, Tom!" Jenny whispered urgently. "One of them is Syd. He must have escaped and come up on a bike to warn them. The other two we know, but who's the little man in the mack? The one pumping with Syd."

"That's the foreman chap in his black beret. So he's in the gang now... The old chap in the brown suit is getting excited and waving his arms about. I reckon he's the boss, Jenny. Pudding Face has to do what he's told... Wish we could hear them. I'm sure he's telling those two boobs to pump harder."

Jenny giggled, although she knew that there was not really anything funny about the way in which three greedy, wicked man and one youth were fighting against time to find a stolen diamond necklace.

"Watch," Tom whispered. "Blandish is hauling up the bucket and it looks heavy----- Now he's yelling to the old boy to help."

But the man in the brown suit was leaning over the parapet of the well waiting for the bucket to come up. It came up very slowly because it was heavy, and not until it appeared above the parapet did the old man help to swing it over and empty it. Then he called out something to the two pumpers who seemed very pleased to stop work. Syd looked at the palms of his hands as if he was suffering, and then the four of them gathered round the well for a conference. When they broke away, Jenny and Tom were amazed to see that the old man was sitting astride the big bucket.

"They're going to let him down the well," Tom gasped. "We've got to tell the others about this right away... Now the foreman has got to pump by himself while Syd helps his father. You couldn't blame them much if they let the old boy down and then went off for a cup of tea, could you?"

Jenny laughed. "I'll go back and tell the others. You wait till they come. I expect I'll have to guard the cave then, if the twins and David and Nicky want to come up here... Promise you'll come back to the cave, Tom, and keep me company. I won't be a sentry by myself."

The last thing that Tom wanted to do was to guard the cave with Jenny. He wanted to be on the spot here, watching these frantic men exhaust themselves. Perhaps they really had got an important clue.

"O.K., Jen," he said. "I'll come. We'll want more than one sentry now whatever we do. Go carefully."

Ten minutes later the others, excited and breathless, arrived at the edge of the wood with Macbeth. David ordered them back under cover and listened to what Tom had to say.

"And the old chap is still down the well, David. I wouldn't like to go down sitting on that bucket. Pudding Face is in charge of the winch and dear Sydney and the foreman are manning the pump."

"They're still getting water up," David agreed. "There's too much for my liking coming through the cave now. D'you mind going back to Jenny? I'm sure nobody will find our cave, but I wouldn't leave any of the girls alone now. We'll be back as soon as we've found out anything important, and if

they spot us we shall have to scatter and get back to you without giving the game away. If we're not back in an hour one of you might come up carefully and see what's happening. Cheerio!"

Tom went off reluctantly and then David called the others round him.

"We shall have to spread out about thirty yards apart through the wood and watch them all the time. Mackie must be kept quiet because whatever happens we mustn't be seen. They'll give themselves away sooner or later now that they think we've gone."

"I hope so," Peter whispered. "It's going to rain hard again and the light is so bad it's difficult to see their faces."

"That's no loss," Nicholas said. "I never want to see their faces again. Would you like me to crawl over to that bush? I might be able to hear what they're saying from there."

Before David could answer, Mary squeaked excitedly. "Look! There's somebody running over the hill from the drive. It's the girl! The girl in red jeans. The girl who followed us from the village."

It was Marilyn, sure enough, and although they could not hear what she was saying, it was easy to guess.

"That's done it," Peter whispered. "She's been back to the *Two Bells* to tell her Syd that she's seen us in the gorge."

"That's it," Nicholas agreed. "Syd had already hurried up here after he'd escape, to tell them what had happened, but the girl didn't know that. I wonder how they missed each other."

"Even if we did rescue Nicky and lock them up," Dickie gloated, "Syd and his horrible mother didn't *know* that we were coming back here. They'd think that we have all scampered off home. This adventure is getting utterly fantastic. And look now. They're pulling up the old boy like mad. If they're not careful he'll shoot out of the top."

They watched, fascinated, as the old man was helped over the parapet and took a long drink from a flask which he took from his pocket. The others crowded round as Marilyn told her story again, and the Lone Piners lay flat on the wet ground as the girl pointed in their direction. The others turned and faced the wood and seemed to be staring at them, but the man in the brown suit waved his arms and turned on Blandish who, it seemed, was just as angry.

"Lie still," David whispered. "He can't have found the treasure in the well because if he had he wouldn't care where we were... Look now! He's going mad! He's realized that those two aren't pumping and the springs are filling the well again."

All four, with two working at each handle, sprang at the pump while Marilyn leaned against the parapet and watched them. They pumped so hard that the water gushed forth as if from a fire hose and poured down the trench into their stream. They pumped as if they were crazy and suddenly the water stopped flowing. Brown Suit turned towards the parapet, slipped in the mud and fell. Faintly, on the wind, came the sound of his curses. He looked into the well and shouted so loudly to his confederates that the Lone Piners heard his anguished cry of, "Pump, you fools. Pump. It's filling up again."

They pumped. The water gushed again for thirty seconds and then stopped. The men stopped pumping and began to scream at each other. Brown Suit danced up and down shaking his clenched fists above his head.

David rolled over on his back and began to laugh. "I bet he's foaming at the mouth. He's forgotten something I learnt last term. I guessed that this might happen and now it has."

"Stop boasting," Peter whispered. "What's happened? Has the pump broken?"

"No. That's all right. It's just that a pump like that won't lift water below a certain level. Only a pump submerged below the level of the water could do that. If they really want to empty the well they'll have to do it with a bucket

or a submersible pump and the fools don't realize it... MACKIE! COME HERE!"

Macbeth, excited by the sight of the dancing figures round the well, had pulled his lead from Mary's hand and streaked across the grass towards his enemies. David forgot his warning and shouted angrily at the dog and then they all seemed to lose their heads. As Mackie barked a challenge, the men at the well looked up and saw him. Without hesitation, Blandish picked up an iron bar and stepped forward threateningly.

As soon as Mary realized his intention, she screamed and ran out of the wood to save Macbeth. David got up and grabbed in vain at Dickie, who unhesitatingly followed his twin. Macbeth, sensing danger, stopped barking and in the brief silence they all heard Brown Suit shout, "Get 'em! Get 'em all! Leave the well. Get those kids and the dog once and for all."

"Get Nicky back to the cave, Peter," David snapped. Tell Tom that we'll come back when we can," and then he, in his turn, dashed into the open shouting at the twins in an attempt to get between them and the advancing enemy.

12. Cold Fire

As soon as Jenny had told the others what she and Tom had seen at the well David, as she had expected, asked her to stay and guard the cave.

"I'll ask Tom to come down as soon as we get up there, Jenny. We must leave somebody here and we don't want you to be alone. Thanks for coming back so quickly. Tell Tom not to leave the cave and if nothing special happens we'll send the twins back as messengers. Keep Mackie on the lead, Mary. What about you, Peter? Would you rather stay here? How's the knee?"

"I'm sick of it," Peter replied. "Anyway, it's better, and I want to come with you, thanks."

The twins, grumbling because they were being hurried said 'Good-bye' as if they were never going to see her again, and almost before she realized it Jenny was alone.

She sat on a rolled-up sleeping-bag at the entrance of the cave with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands. The rain was pouring down again and the sky was like a grey curtain reaching down to the tree tops.

Then she heard Tom's peewit whistle from a few yards away and jumped up to welcome him as he came round the corner of the big rock. He was very wet and a little out of humour.

He took off the cycling cape he had been wearing over his head, shook the water from it and then stood, listening for a moment, on the ledge outside the cave.

The river is making a lot of noise down there, Jen. I s'pose it's rising fast. What about the punt? Didn't David untie it and use the rope for climbing up here?"

"Yes, he did. I expect it's in the cave somewhere. Do you mean that the punt might drift away?"

Tom nodded. "It could if it's not tied up and we might want that punt in a hurry. Look for the rope, Jen, and I'll go down and try to tie up the punt and have a look at the river. Sounds angry to me. Everyone has been warning us about what happens when it rains in Wales and now it's raining here as well."

Jenny soon found the rope, and while she was at the back of the cave she noticed that much more water was pouring in through the partly blocked entrance. If the stream rose much higher it might not be possible to sleep in the cave. She said nothing of her misgivings to Tom when giving him the rope, and watched him in silence as he slithered down the slope by the stream. He was soon back and when he had recovered his breath from the climb he told Jenny what he had seen.

The river is rising fast, Jen. I've tied up the punt to a tree and it should be O.K. This gorge is a grim place... Wish we knew what was happening to the others."

"So do I," Jenny replied. "Why shouldn't we go up and see?"

Before Tom could answer they heard Macbeth barking quite close to them.

"Back into the cave," Tom whispered. "We mustn't be seen until we know what's happening."

They went to the back of the cave where the muddy stream was now roaring through the opening. The water was making so much noise that they could not hear Mackie again, but suddenly a great crash and noise of splashing warned them that somebody was in the gully above. Tom clapped his hand over Jenny's mouth.

"May not be one of us," he whispered. "Quiet!"

They knew almost at once that the enemy had found one entrance to their hiding place, because as they crouched against the wall of the cave trying to avoid the falling water they heard a shout of triumph a few feet above them.

"Hi, Harry!" Blandish roared. "Come down here! I've found some sort of a hide-out. The stream is running into a cave."

Then came the crunch of heavy boots in the bed of the stream outside, and the entrance was darkened as Blandish stooped and tried to see over the top of the stone into the cave. Although Tom and Jenny knew that they could not possibly be seen through the falling water, they dared not move until Blandish stood up and shouted again. Whether or not there was an answering hail they could not hear. As they moved a few steps down the cave towards the entrance Jenny realized that she was shivering. Tom must have felt her shaking, for he put his arm round her shoulders and whispered, "It's all right, Jenny. He doesn't know we're here and I don't think any of his pals heard him. Maybe they're chasing the others, because I'm sure David and Peter will try and lead them away from here. If they are being chased I bet they've gone down to the bridge and will try and work their way back to us along the river."

For a few seconds they stood in silence, and then they heard the noise of iron against stone at the head of the cave. Tom moved back to the falling water and to his alarm realized that Blandish was using an iron bar to lever away the big stone which was controlling the flow of the stream. He could see the shape of the bar through the water - see the point probing under the big rock and hear the changed sound of the falling water as the stone was shifted. He sensed the danger at once, for he knew that when the stone was moved a tremendous rush of water might sweep them both out of the cave. He turned back to Jenny, grabbing up three rolled-up sleeping-bags from the floor.

"Outside, quick, Jen! Pick up what you can. The water's coming in."

She obeyed at once and Tom pushed her to the far side of the ledge away from the stream. He had just had a very unpleasant thought. If Blandish could shift the big rock, he might well be able to squeeze through into the cave from that end. Tom put down his bundles and was about to go back into the cave for more, when they heard Mackie bark again somewhere below them, and then came the peewit's call from the direction of the bridge. The river was still noisy, but the rain had stopped, although thunder was muttering in the distance.

Tom stepped forward and peered through the screen of bushes just below the ledge and saw the dog, covered in mud, standing threateningly on the steep slope by the stream. He was barking at somebody who was climbing up towards the cave, but before Tom could decide what to do there came a crash and a roar in the cave behind them. Jenny ran across to him just as a turgid wave of muddy water swept over the ledge, bringing with it most of the stores they had left in the cave. A haversack, rolled forward by the flood, struck her legs. She stumbled forward and clutched at Tom, who leaned back against the water swirling round his legs and fought for a foothold. Exerting all his strength, he pulled Jenny backwards until they both toppled into the water rushing out of the cave. He pulled her to her feet and spat muddy water from his mouth, conscious again of the peewit's cry from somewhere quite close, and of Macbeth's angry bark. Then, and this was much more frightening, there came a shout of triumph from behind them.

They turned to see the towering figure of Blandish standing on the top of the rock above the entrance of the cave. His fat, pasty face was smeared with mud and he was brandishing an iron bar.

When he saw them his face creased into a horrid sneer.

"So we've flushed you out of your drain, have we?" he shouted. "Stay where you are. We'll decide what to do with you when I've killed that dog." Then, looking over their heads down to where Mackie was still barking defiantly, he called, "Take it easy, Harry. I've got two of 'em and found their hideout, too. Stop there and I'll come down. I'm going to kill that dog. Where are the other brats? The others should have got them by now... Take it easy, Harry."

Jenny clutched at Tom's hand. "We're surrounded, Tom. Where are the others and what shall we do?"



Plot, accompanied Tomp

...were surrounded, Tom:

Tom's answer was to put his fingers to his mouth and whistle the peewit's cry loud and clear. Answer came from the undergrowth down by the river, and then, as they heard Blandish scrambling about on the top of the cave, Tom pulled Jenny to one side.

"We'll go down," he said. "Once we're in the trees they'll never catch us. Hang on to me."

He slipped over the ledge across which the water was still running fast and helped Jenny down beside him. Then they looked down in time to see Harry Sentence, crawling on hands and knees up the steep slope towards the snarling Macbeth.

Sentence was an old man, but he was tough. It cannot have been easy for him to have chased the Lone Piners through the rain and then to fight his way through the undergrowth on this side of the gorge, until he found the stream running into the river. The others had soon realized how steep was the climb up to the cave, and Sentence must have found it almost beyond his powers.

He had found footprints in soft ground on the banks of the stream near where it ran into the river, and when he had looked up at the undergrowth on the steep slopes above him it had seemed as if others had already climbed that way. The dog found him when he was about half-way up and feeling the strain. Sentence had good reason to hate and fear Macbeth, but his foothold on the steep slope was so precarious that, when the dog dashed out of the bushes and began to bark, he could do little more than throw stones at him.

Macbeth had been hit by stones before, so he retreated up the slope and continued to bark. Then it was that Sentence heard Blandish call and looked up to see him standing on the rock a few feet above the boy and the girl he had seen together in the sale rooms at Ludlow. The boy whistled on his fingers and the same weird call was repeated from somewhere below.

Sentence was very tired. His heart was thumping uncomfortably and his fury was much greater than his judgment. Macbeth just above him barked again and then he heard Blandish say that he was coming down to kill the dog. Then the boy slid over the ledge and turned to help the girl. With a shout of warning and anger Sentence staggered to his feet, fearing that even now these two might escape, join their friends and perhaps call in the police.

The dog jumped forward. Sentence stooped for another stone. His feet slipped from under him as he lost his balance. He clutched at a bush and missed and with a despairing cry rolled helplessly over and over down the steep slope in a shower of stones and rubble.

Down by the river, hiding in the undergrowth and hoping to dodge their pursuers, the other Lone Piners waited anxiously. They heard Tom's whistle and Macbeth's bark and also the sound of distant shouting. Then Peter, who knew that David was only about twenty yards behind her, realized that she was close to the stream and track which led up to their cave. Suddenly she heard a cry for help, followed by the sound of something heavy crashing down the steep slope. A shower of loose stones splashed into the river, which was now nearly as high as the banks. As she ran forward, fearful of what was happening, she saw Sentence roll at frightening speed through the bracken on the river's bank and then disappear into the water.

Peter was ten or fifteen yards away when this happened and she had no chance of saving him. In the following seconds of indecision she heard Macbeth again very close, and then the noise of another shower of stones, and what sounded like a shout of warning from Tom. Then her name was called by David. Another weak cry for help from the river roused her into action. She pushed aside the bushes at the river's edge and saw Sentence, struggling feebly in the strong current, swept past her.

"David!" she shouted with all her strength. "Go down to the bridge. He's drowning and I'm going after him."

Poor Peter! So much had happened to her in the last forty-eight hours. She had already swum the river once, she had struggled with an injured knee to keep up with the others, and now she had no choice but to try and save the

man they all had such good reason to hate and fear. No time now to do more than fling off her mackintosh and dive into the river. As she struck out, the chill water struck through her clothes and for a moment she struggled for breath. Then, after a few quick strokes, she caught Sentence, who was floundering out of his depth and looking in great trouble.

He was a big man and Peter knew that her only chance of saving him was to get him in to the bank. She wasn't really strong enough to hold him up and the current was fierce. It was almost too strong for her because, as she grabbed at Sentence's threshing arm, she realized that she had lost control and was being swept down towards the bridge. She tried to get on the other side of Sentence and push him towards the bank. He tried to beat her off. Her head went under and when she came up there was a roaring in her ears and Sentence had disappeared. The roaring was louder now and suddenly she realized that it was made by the flood water surging through the narrow arch of the bridge which was now very close.

Then she saw Sentence's head in a flurry of foam a few yards in front and with a few powerful strokes she grabbed him again and fought to keep his head above water. He was no longer struggling, and with a sob of despair Peter prayed for enough strength to get him to the bank before they were both carried under the bridge and swept against the rocks in the shallower water on the other side. She heard her name called again and then to her amazement realized that David was in the water beside her. Usually she was the better swimmer, but her injured knee must have weakened her, and she realized not only that she was desperately tired but that David was swimming with great determination and strength. She tried to smile as he came up and grabbed Sentence by his coat collar.

"Hang on to me, Pete," he yelled above the roar of the rushing water. We'll be under the bridge in a sec... KEEP TOGETHER..." and then everything was blotted out in a welter of foam and the clamour and power of the water dragging her down and down. She wanted David. She shouted his name. The water closed over her head and then her foot struck something unyielding and she realized that she was no longer swimming but rolling over in shallow water. Someone was shouting, and then someone much

more important put strong hands under her arms and lifted her out of the rushing water. It was David, of course.

"You all right, Pete? He was hardly worth saving, but help me haul him up the bank. Just like you to go in after him..." He spat out some river water, and when she leaned against him for a second, said, "Remind me to tell you what I think of you some time."

The man running along the bank and shouting was Bates, the foreman. Tom and Jenny were not far behind and as she glanced back at the bridge she saw the twins and Nicholas. She felt sick and weak and happy at the same time and hardly realized that she was helping David to pull the unconscious Sentence to the bank. David turned him over and when Bates came up snapped, "If you know anything about artificial respiration you'd better get to work on him. I've forgotten most of what I once knew... Buck up. He doesn't look too good."

Bates neither argued nor hesitated. He proved unexpectedly competent as he set to work on Sentence and when he saw Peter stretched out on the wet grass he said, "What about that kid? She went in after him, I s'pose? See if she's O.K."

Peter sat up and gave David a watery smile.

"I'm all right. Just had enough swimming for one day. Will he be all right?"

Bates nodded. "I reckon so. He's breathing now, thanks to you kids. You'd better look after yourselves now."

Then the others came up and Peter tried to explain what had happened.

"Don't fuss, Jenny, please. I had to go in after him, but I couldn't have managed without David. He jumped in when he saw I wasn't doing very well with the old man. He got us both through the bridge, too. I wonder if I've got any dry clothes anywhere?"

Before anyone could answer David got up, leaving Bates to look after Sentence.

"What a pleasant meeting this is going to be," he said. "Look who's coming now."

The others were only too ready for a distraction from watching Bates working on Sentence. All except Tom were feeling very shaken and miserable and none of them knew what to do next. Tom was more angry than frightened and annoyed with himself because he was a bad swimmer, and knew that if he had jumped in after Peter she would have had two to rescue instead of one. He had wondered whether to launch himself downstream in the punt, but one look at the raging river was enough to convince him that he would have been helpless by himself.

Now they all looked up in silence as Blandish, still with the iron bar in his hand, came up with Syd and Marilyn a few paces behind him. Dickie picked up Macbeth and tucked him under his arm. Tom stood in front of him. A long silence was broken by Sentence coughing and retching, then Blandish spoke.

"He rolled down into the river, didn't he? Who pulled him out?"

"Peter!" the twins yelled, and then Bates added,

"That fair kid went in after him and saved his life. The boy went in after them both and got them up here after they were swept under the bridge. I see 'em. They're grand kids and I've had enough of this business. You can look after him now."

Blandish's face was twitching as he dropped the iron bar. He looked a beaten man. Syd obviously wanted to go home, and Marilyn looked away when David said, "We've had enough of this. When he's well enough to understand, one of you had better tell this old man that he wouldn't be alive but for Peter here. All you can do now is to get out and leave us alone. I should think your friend ought to go to hospital and the obvious thing is to get him up to the road and telephone for an ambulance or a doctor."

They went. Blandish told Syd and Marilyn to run ahead and telephone for an ambulance and when they had gone without a backward glance he went

over to Bates. Together they lifted the white-faced Sentence to his feet, made a "bandy chair" with linked hands and carried him away.

"We'll have to get up to the cave right away," David said. "Pete and I must get into dry clothes and we all need a hot drink... What are you looking so glum about, Tom? You were the only one looking reasonably cheerful just now."

The sun was out now and mist was rising in the gorge and above the river's banks.

"I'm going to sit down," Peter said. "I'm so wet that wet grass doesn't matter. What happened at the cave, Tom?"

Tom told them and admitted that he doubted whether they had any dry clothes. "I grabbed a couple of sleeping-bags before Blandish moved the stone and let the water in, but the rest of our gear was washed out when we were busy trying not to be washed down into the river... You two must get into dry clothes somehow. Peter's teeth are chattering and you're not looking too good."

David glanced at Peter and realized that she couldn't stand much more. Before he could speak, however, Mary ran over to Peter and hugged her.

"We haven't started to tell you how brave you are, Peter. I expect we'll all be too shy to tell you when we're not so excited, so we may as well say it now... Nicholas thinks so, too, don't you, Nicky?"

Nicholas gulped and nodded. He would never forget the sight of Peter and David struggling in the river to save their enemy and then seeing them all swept helplessly under the bridge.

"Don't let's get soppy," Dickie broke in loudly. "Everybody's been wonderful except us twins, and that's quite a change. Trouble is, we haven't got the treasure. Would you like us to go up to the cave and rescue everything we can?"

"That's a good idea," David admitted. "Peter and I must get dry and I can't think of anything we can do except ask for help in the village. We might get a lift. We'll leave a message for you at the Post Office... There's nothing more we can do here tonight, but if we can get beds in Bringewood we can come back here tomorrow and explore the well and have another look round."

Tom nodded. "O.K. Off you go and good luck. We'll bring back anything that's dry, but I shouldn't think we ought to store anything in the cave in case we have another deluge. Unless we can shove that rock back where the stream comes in there's nothing to control the flow of the water... Cheerio."

There was no need to hide now so they took the easier way up the meadow. Nicholas wanted to look at the well, but Tom said that they could leave that to the morning. "Salvage is our job, Nicky. We must find the sleeping-bags and haversacks and we must have something to eat. I'm worried about Peter and David although I didn't dare say much. If they can't find dry clothes and somewhere to sleep we may have to ring up Witchend or Barton and let the grown-ups know, and I suppose they'll have to come and fetch us."

"We can't do *that*!" Dickie protested. "That would be tray-truss, if you know what I mean. Tray-truss to us, We've got rid of Nicky's enemies, but we haven't found the treasure and we've got all the summer holidays to find it in. I'd like to go down that well in the big bucket."

"I bet you wouldn't," Nicholas said. "But thank you all very much for helping us about the treasure. I hope it didn't rain hard at Barton because if it did my aunt will fuss a lot and wonder if we're all drowned."

"We nearly were," Jenny said. "My dad will be fussing, too... Here's the way down and there's still plenty of water in the stream."

They followed it down and all jumped into the little gully where Blandish had cursed and struggled with the big stone less than two hours ago.

"I suppose we could all shove that stone back again," Tom said thoughtfully. "If we wanted to use the cave, that is. The entrance is big enough for us to get in this end now... Go on, twins. You first with Mackie."

It's not a big drop and none of us can get much wetter than we are already. Nicky next. Feet in first and then down on your behinds."

Dickie went first and Mary followed with a rapturous shriek. They went down with a clatter of stones and gravel and then their excited voices boomed up from the cave.

"It's like a sort of water toboggan!" Mary yelled. "You want to be quick, though, else you'll get soaked."

Nicky didn't seem very keen, so Tom said, "I'll go next and make the hole larger and you can come last if you like. Out of the way, Jen. Gentleman first," and he squeezed himself into the entrance rather like a cork going into a bottle.

He brought down a lot more gravel from the bed of the stream and Jenny followed easily after him. The cave seemed very dim, but when her eyes got used to the gloom she saw that Tom was already picking up some tins of food which were wedged behind a rock.

"I don't see the sense of getting any wetter," Nicholas shouted from above. "I'll go round the other way."

Jenny, still at the narrowest end of the cave, laughed and turned to help Tom. Her foot slipped on something that was certainly not gravel and some instinct made her stoop and pick it up. There wasn't enough light to see what it was, but it felt slimy and rather horrid in her hand. She was just going to drop it in disgust when her fingers felt something hard and nobbly, so she walked forward into the light at the entrance to the cave. Tom looked at her curiously.

"What have you got, Jen? Looks like a bit of rubber."

It was a small, square rubber sponge bag drawn together at the neck. The surface was green with slime, but wonderingly Jenny rubbed some off and saw that underneath the bag was patterned in a small black and white check. There was something inside the bag, but when she pulled at the neck the

rotted material fell apart, and on to the floor of the cave fell the Whiteflower diamonds, sparkling bravely in the evening sunshine.

As Jenny stooped and picked them up wonderingly, Nicholas came clattering round the big rock and stopped on the ledge in amazement.

There were twelve glittering jewels held together on a silver chain. Jenny ran them wonderingly through her fingers while Tom stared open-mouthed.

"Cold fire!" she whispered. "Poor Harriet said they were like cold fire and so they are. Poor, poor Harriet. She hid them where the water ran into the cave... Here you are, Nicky! Here's your treasure. The Whiteflower diamonds found by the Lone Piners!"

13. The End of the Adventure

Peter and David did not have much to say to each other when they left the others. The great storm was still muttering away in the distance and Peter, squelching along in the puddles, guessed that it was now breaking over the Long Mynd and the hills of home. Here, the sun was trying to break through, but the gorge was still gloomy and the river high enough to be flooding over the path in some places.

She had forgotten about her knee; she had almost forgotten how uncomfortable she was in her sodden clothes. She gave no thought to the Whiteflower treasure, but was strangely and quietly happy to be walking with David away from this rather odd adventure. She was surprised when David said,

"I bet it's raining over the Long Mynd now. Of course, it's your home, Pete, but we often say in London that it's funny how those hills get you. Whether we find those diamonds or not, I shan't be sorry to get back to Witchend or Seven Gates, will you?"

"No, I won't. I was thinking about home, too. Did I ever tell you that once when Daddy and I were walking home up Hatchholt on an evening like this, he said something I'll never forget. He said, 'The storms come up the valleys like smoke.' I don't s'pose that was original, but it's true, isn't it?"

He didn't laugh. "True enough. I know what he means. How are you feeling? I'll be warmer without my shirt if you don't mind."

He stripped it off and waved it round his head, trying to dry it. Peter laughed at him and then, looking ahead, saw Blandish and Bates staggering along the flooded track carrying Sentence between them.

"I couldn't bear to speak to them again, David. Let's go slowly until we reach the road. Looks to me as if Sentence is talking as usual, so I s'pose he's feeling better. He's a tough old man. He hasn't even taken his shirt off."

They slowed down until the others disappeared round the corner by the aqueduct and then David said, "He ought to be in hospital. Might have delayed shock or get pneumonia."

"So might we, David. Who's this coming? She's waving to us. It's Fenella!"

The gypsy girl stopped shyly and waited for them. Her eyes widened with surprise when she realized that Peter was wet through and that David was carrying his shirt.

"We have come back. My mother sent me to find you and see if all is well. What has happened? Where are the others? Tom and Jenny and the twins and the new white-haired boy? Who were the men who passed our caravan just now? The one who was carried was wet and cursing. And there were two others running before who asked us about a telephone."

She paused for breath and David put his arm round her shoulders. "We'll tell you everything presently, Fenella. Just tell us now whether Reuben and Miranda are really close by, in your caravan? Have you got a fire and a hot meal ready?"

Fenella nodded happily as Peter took her hand.

"Hurry then, Fenella. You've come just when we wanted you most. I'm going to let them know that we really want their help." She reached inside her sodden shirt, pulled out the little wooden whistle on its silver chain, and put it to her lips. Its note was thin and piercing. She blew three times and was not surprised to see Reuben hurrying round the corner towards them. He scowled at them until Peter ran forward.

"We knew you were close by, Reuben, but I couldn't resist blowing my Romany whistle. Don't be cross with us, please. We really do want your help. We've had a terrific adventure but David and I have both been in the river. We've no dry clothes and nowhere to go for the night."

Reuben pushed his old hat to the back of his head and looked at her shrewdly. Then to Fenella he said, "Run. Tell your mother."

Then he led the way up the sandy track towards the road and they saw the familiar caravan on the patch of grass where they had unloaded the cars on the day they made their camp in the meadow.

Miranda and Fenella were waiting on the steps of the caravan and Reuben said, "They have been in the river. Petronella is cold and hungry. Look after her, romni (wife), and I will see to the boy. Give me a blanket and my black trousers and the shirt I wear on Saturday nights and the best coat, too... And you, Fenella, will see what is in the pot and then put more in, for these two must eat soon."

Miranda nodded and led the two girls into the caravan. A moment or two later Fenella brought out a bundle of clothes and then Reuben took David a few yards into the wood.

"Take off your clothes, boy," he ordered.

David hadn't many to take off but as soon as he was stripped Reuben began to rub him with the blanket. He rubbed him from top to toe until his skin was glowing. He pummelled and kneaded his muscles until David cried for mercy.

"You have a good strong body, my boy. Now you will wear my best clothes although they are too big for you, and then I will give you a Romany drink that will keep the chill out. Tell me while you dress why you two have been in the river. And the others? Where are they?"

Reuben's trousers were of stiff, black corduroy and the waist was somewhere round David's chest, but he was very grateful for them. While he struggled with them and then tied them to himself with a length of twine he told the gypsy of their adventures. His story had reached the attack on the cave when they heard a burst of excited shouting from outside the wood.

"I believe that's the others," David said. "They'll never recognize me in your clothes, Reuben, but let's go and see. They've been up to the cave to collect what's left of our gear. We've nowhere to sleep tonight, so may we camp

round your fire? If it rains again we shall have to crawl under your caravan."

Reuben picked up David's sodden clothes and the damp blanket, but before he could answer they heard Tom's peewit whistle and then his voice from quite close: "David! Where are you? Fenella says you're in the wood. Come quickly!"

"Coming," David shouted. "Reuben's here, too," and he ran back to the gypsy camp. No sooner was he out of the wood than the twins rushed at him.

"David! We've got them! We've acksherley discovered the diamonds. Jenny found them in a sponge bag in the cave!" Mary squeaked.

"They must have been washed down into the cave when Blandish moved the stone," Dickie broke in. "We've done it again, David. Right under their noses it was. Under the water where the water-----"

"Where is it, twins? Who's got it?"

"Jenny has. Here's David, Jen. It doesn't look like him, but it is. Come over and show him."

David ran towards the caravan and nearly tripped over the turn-ups of Reuben's best trousers. The twins ran with him. Then Peter, wearing a coloured skirt, black blouse and head scarf of Miranda's, came down the steps with the gypsy woman behind her. They all crowded round Jenny who was now actually wearing the Whiteflower diamonds round her neck. Tom stood close by her as if to guard the treasure while Nicholas, his face white with excitement, was shouting, "You all ought to have a share of it. You found it. You helped me. We wouldn't ever have found it without you. You must each have one of the diamonds. You must. Really you must."

"Don't be silly, Nicky," Jenny laughed. "The necklace belongs to your aunt and to you because it once belonged to your family. Now you try it on, Peter. Miranda's clothes are a bit big for you but you look wonderful, doesn't she, David? Undo the clasp for me, Tom."

Peter shook her head. "I'd like to hold them but I don't want to wear them. I don't think diamonds are for me. Miranda would like to see them, too. I've been telling her about our adventure."

She took the necklace and touched the diamonds as if they were hot. Then she looked at David. "You know what I mean, don't you? I hate them. They may have cost more than one life. Look, Miranda. The Whiteflower diamonds!"

The gypsy smiled understandingly. "I do not like them, either. Now we will eat and drink and decide what you shall do."

Fenella had been adding all sorts of vegetables and pieces of meat to the stew over the fire. The smell from the pot was delicious. Suddenly the Lone Piners realized that they were ravenous. Peter passed the necklace to Nicholas, who passed it to David and asked him to take care of it. David, not at all sure of the pockets of Reuben's trousers, passed it to Tom who buttoned it up in the pocket of his shirt. The twins found their plastic cups and plates in one of the haversacks and a few minutes later they were all sitting round the gypsies' fire. Reuben gave Peter and David a cup of some herbal drink which he brewed on an oil stove in the caravan. It was bitter, yet aromatic and sent a warm glow through their tired bodies. Then they settled down to eat, and nothing seemed as important as food.

After ten minutes Nicholas put down his spoon and said, "I've had an awful idea. We ought to have telephoned to Jenny's father or somebody in Barton Beach so that my aunt knows we've got it. The necklace, I mean."

"You're right, Nicky," David said. "And I ought to have telephoned Dad to tell him that we're all right after the storm. They'll be worried about us if they don't hear. We haven't been too good about keeping in touch, have we? I suppose one of us ought to go into the village? Truth is, I can hardly believe that this adventure is over."

"But it isn't," Jenny cried. "I don't want it to stop. Nicky practically belongs to us now, and this adventure isn't really over until we know that everything is going to be wonderful for Miss Whiteflower and for him, too. P'raps

there'll be enough money when the diamonds are sold for you to build up the Manor again?"

Nicholas laughed. "Thank you very much, Jenny, but we'd never want to do that... What shall we do about telephoning though? We must tell Aunt Margaret."

"Let's all go into the village," Dickie suggested. "All except David and Peter because they're too disguised. You two stay here and dry your clothes and help Miranda and Fenella wash up and we'll go and telephone."

"Go on, then," David agreed. "Better leave the diamonds with me, Tom, if you're going into the village. I wouldn't go near the *Two Bells* if I were you. And don't be long because it will be dark in an hour."

Tom handed over the necklace, which David wrapped in his handkerchief, and then set off with the others. But they got no farther than the road, for there they met Mr. Morton. As he stopped the car the twins rushed at him and dragged him out of the driving seat.

"We were going into the village to telephone you this very minute. We've got the most wonderful news," Mary began, and then Dickie rather spoiled a good start by adding, "We're all very well except David and Peter who have been rescuing a horrible old man from drowning in the river. We've found the diamonds and the others are with Reuben and Miranda just down here-----"

Mr. Morton looked startled.

"Well, I'm here now and very pleased to see you all. Come back with me to the others, please, and then you can tell me all your news. We had such a bad thunderstorm this afternoon that we thought we'd like to know how you were all getting on. How's your camp, Tom?"

Tom laughed. "Tell you all about it soon, sir. Truth is we haven't got one."

After that things happened very quickly. Round the gypsies' fire Mr. Morton was told the full story and shown the Whiteflower diamonds. David told

him how Peter had saved Sentence's life, and of how they now knew that he was the man who must have persuaded Harriet Brown to steal the necklace for him and then deserted her when she needed him most. They told him, too, about Blandish and how Nicholas had been kidnapped and kept in the *Two Bells*. They interrupted each other sometimes, but when Mr. Morton had heard enough he said,

"You've all done enough camping and tonight I'm going to take you home. Stay here till I come back. I'm going to the village to telephone Mr. Harman and ask him to come over at once in his car, so get everything ready for a quick move. I shall call in at the *Two Bells*."

He was back in an hour, but it seemed a very long hour to the excited Lone Piners, who first helped the gypsies to tidy up and then got their own stuff together.

Tom and David did most of the packing, with Nicholas helping, while the two girls went into the caravan with Fenella when she went to bed.

"They're fortune-telling in there," Tom grumbled. "Young Jenny is crazy on fortunes and horoscopes and Peter's not much better. You'd think girls would have more sense, wouldn't you? Got the diamonds safe, David?"

They were still wrapped in his grubby handkerchief in the pocket of Reuben's best trousers, but David had undone the knots several times while they were concentrating on drying off his clothes round the fire, just to make sure. His own trousers seemed to have shrunk when at last he struggled into them but he was glad to be wearing them and his own shirt again. When the girls came out of the caravan giggling, Peter, too, was in her own clothes and said she was feeling fine.

"And my knee is much better, David. I'd forgotten all about it until you asked. I wonder what your father has found out and when Mr. Harman will come? I don't think they'll let us stay here tonight, do you? Anyway, I think I'd rather be at Witchend, if you can find room for me."

Mr. Morton arrived soon afterwards. He was looking very angry when he strode over to the group round the gypsies' fire.

"You really have got yourselves mixed up with something unpleasant this time. You ought to have told me what was going on. I'll be having a private talk with David about this some time, but you can start loading up the car and get your bikes on the back. This adventure is over so far as all of you are concerned. You're going back right away to sleep in your beds tonight. Peter stays at Witchend with us; but first of all we'll take Miss Whiteflower her diamonds. Mr. Harman promised to go up and give her the good news and then he's coming on here for Jenny and Tom and anyone else who can squeeze into his car."

"But, Daddy," Mary squeaked, "what about the villains? Have you found out about them? Is the old man still alive? He was a most sinister character. Daddy. Please tell us what has happened to him?"

"He's gone to hospital in an ambulance, Mary, and what little I have heard of him suggests that he'll soon be out again. He's tough. Now get your gear into the boot and be ready to start in a few minutes. I promise I'll tell you everything I know before you all go to bed tonight... And here comes Mr. Harman. Go and show yourself, Jenny."

Jenny ran to meet her father and flung her arms round him.

"We really have got the diamonds. Dad. I found them. Have you told Miss Whiteflower? Because we must give them to her this very night. Nicholas is very, very pleased with us, aren't you, Nicky? David! Please show Dad the diamond necklace."

Mr. Harman disengaged himself. Although trying to preserve his dignity as Postmaster of Barton Beach he was obviously delighted with his welcome as the others crowded round.

"Very, very remarkable," he said as he handled the necklace, "I wouldn't have believed it possible. All that fuss and misery and loss of a poor young woman's life just for these diamonds. I find it all most interesting. Ah! Here are your Romany friends. Perhaps I should say 'Good evening', and I gather I should thank them for helping you all. Good evening to you, Richard and Mary. And here is Nicholas Whiteflower. I have seen your aunt, Nicholas, and told her of your good fortune and her message to you is that you should

go home to Mrs. Quickseed's at once. I will take you now and there will be room for the twins, too, so that-----"

Jenny was so excited that she interrupted him. "We'll come, Dad, but you must speak to Reuben and Miranda first. She's just told our fortunes. If you ask her nicely and cross her hand with silver she'll tell yours, I'm sure. She's very, very good and gives most exciting fortunes. Don't you laugh, Dad. It's true. She's very, very clever."

"I'm sure she is, my dear," Mr. Harman said as he backed away. "I am not very interested in what has not yet happened, so I hope she will excuse me," but he went to speak to the gypsies and asked if he might see inside the caravan. Meanwhile, David and Tom organized the packing of the two cars and a quarter of an hour after Mr. Harman's arrival they set out for the Stiperstones and Witchend, after thanks and a warm 'Goodbye' to the gypsies, who came up to the road to see them off.

There was more room in Mr. Morton's car for luggage so most of it went with him, with David and Peter mixed up with it on the rear seat and Nicholas in front watching the headlights bring an almost magical beauty to the trees and hedgerows as they rushed through the lovely night. For it was a lovely night now that the storm had passed.

They reached Barton a quarter of an hour before Boy Blue. Mr. Morton sent David up to see Mrs. Harman to tell her that all was well and that Jenny would soon be there.

"And ask her if she'd like to come up to Miss Whiteflower's with us and see the diamonds. I don't believe that you youngsters take enough notice of Mrs. Harman-----"

"But she won't let us, Mr. Morton," Peter interrupted. "She doesn't like us because we like Jenny, and she's often unkind to Jenny, too."

David nudged her as he got out of the car. "Come up with me, Peter. I'll need your help," and then Mr. Morton turned round and smiled at her.

"Not really for me to say, Peter, but some of us might try being kind to her instead of thinking she's always in the wrong."

The moon was up when Boy Blue drew in behind Mr. Morton's car. Steam was hissing from the radiator cap but Mr. Harman seemed to think that this was a normal occurrence and was very pleased with himself.

Tom, Jenny and the twins were in fine form, too, but when Nicholas explained that David and Peter were asking Mrs. Harman to come with them to see Miss Whiteflower and hear the whole story, a sudden silence fell upon the group.

Mr. Harman spoke first.

"Very kind. Very kind indeed. I doubt if she will come. Mrs. Harman rarely goes out in the evenings. Come up with me, Jenny, and we will add our persuasions. It is true that Miss Whiteflower is expecting all who can come."

Jenny gave Tom the sort of look which meant 'stay where you are, please', and followed her father. The twins ran over to Mr. Morton, who was lighting his pipe with smug satisfaction.

"Are you pleased with us, Daddy?" Mary asked. "We've really been very good while we've been away and it's nice to think we've found those diamonds for Nicholas. That doesn't happen every day, does it?"

Mr. Morton rumbled her hair affectionately.

"You're a couple of rascals and you ought to be in bed. Lucky that I told your mother you really would be late. Now, twins. Behave very nicely to Mrs. Harman. Here she comes," and he got out of the car and shook hands with her.

Mrs. Harman was wearing a black straw hat and her best coat and seemed rather dazed.

"Thank you very much, I'm sure," she repeated several times, as she was helped into the front seat of the Mortons' car. "I never do go out in the evenings but these young people were very pressing. And the diamonds! Your son has shown them to me, Mr. Morton, and although I strongly disapprove of all this camping out and time wasting, Jenny says that I should come with you as she found the diamonds. I should like to hear all about it because I am very perplexed."

And so when at last the two cars drew up outside the widow Quickseed's cottage it was just after ten o'clock. The moon was high over the Devil's Chair and the western escarpment of the Stiperstones in deep shadow. The door of the cottage opened and Miss Whiteflower came out to greet them. Behind her was Peter's Aunt Carol from Seven Gates.

"Miss Whiteflower told me your wonderful news," she said to her niece. "Half a dozen diamond necklaces would not keep your Uncle Micah out of bed after ten o'clock, because he is up at five every morning, but I can't wait to hear what you've all been doing."

There had never been so many people in the cottage before, and there were only enough chairs for a few of the grown-ups. The Lone Piners sat on the floor and shared mugs of cocoa which Mrs. Quickseed had ready for them.

"Nicholas had better tell your story," Mr. Morton suggested. "I'll come in with mine later and tell you what I heard from the Blandishes."

Nicholas seemed to be a very different boy from the one whose white face pressed against Harman's shop window only a few days ago, had haunted Jenny. He stood by his aunt's chair with much more assurance and when Dickie, who was sitting under the table, called "Speech" he just grinned cheerfully and said, "I'll tell everything I can remember and Aunt Margaret - not the twins - must interrupt if I don't tell it so that she understands."

Nicholas told the story well and was clever enough to forget some of the occasions when they were in real danger. Peter - with Jenny interrupting - told of their meeting with Syd and Marilyn and of how they were tricked into the ruined mill, and then David told them about the well and the cave

and how Blandish had really found the treasure for them by moving the great stone and flooding them out.

"You carry on from there, Jenny. You found them. Stepped on them, didn't you? Here they are, anyway. Pass them to Miss Whiteflower."

So Jenny finished the story and after untying the knots in David's dirty handkerchief, she passed the lovely necklace to Miss Whiteflower, who took it with shaking hands.

She tried to whisper her thanks but the words would not come for a long minute. At last she said, as she dabbed her eyes, "It's not just its value to us or that it has belonged to the family for so long. It's all the fun you've had and the way you've been loyal to each other and been such wonderful friends to Nicholas who had been rude to you because he was silly and jealous. It is when you are in trouble that you most quickly find kindness and friendship."

"Put them on," Mary said cheekily. "We'd like to see them on you, Miss Whiteflower. Put them on her *now*, Nicky."

Miss Whiteflower was not young, her hair was nearly white and her skin beginning to wrinkle, but she looked almost pretty with the diamonds round her neck as she stood up and gave them all a little curtsy.

"Now, sir," she said to Mr. Morton, "your kindness to us will never be forgotten. Tell us about Sentence and Blandish."

"Not much more to tell, really. When I found Sun Lane there was an ambulance outside the *Two Bells* and I drove up in time to hear Sentence grumbling about the rough way he had been carried along the river bank. They must have got a lift in a car. Before they closed the doors of the ambulance I asked to speak to him and they allowed me to do so.

"I told him that his life had been saved by Peter and David at risk of their own, and that you had now found the Whiteflower diamonds which had been hidden at the entrance to a cave where a stream ran in. I could see at once that he believed me. He cursed himself, and when I told him how

much we knew about him he admitted that he knew the cave and the entrance to it and had often met Harriet Brown there. I saw the meaning of the clue at once, as I'm sure you all do... No. No. Wait till I've finished, please. By this time I was feeling annoyed so although Mrs. Blandish tried to slam the door of the inn in my face I got inside.

"The son and his girl were both there, You seem to have made quite a mess of his face, David. Yours isn't normal, but I'm not sure that you're not better looking than you were a week ago. Anyway, the Blandishes could do anything but tell the truth and they told me how they had recognized Sentence by the scar on his hand. They can't make the inn pay and have promised me that they're going in a few days' time, anyway. Blandish knew when he was beaten, and when I told him that Sentence had admitted that the entrance to the cave was a reasonable place to hide the necklace and why, he said, "We've had enough of the likes of him, anyway. Let him go back to Australia. He's a bad one, and he served that girl Harriet Brown more than one dirty trick."

"He whined about Bringewood being unlucky for them and I'm sure we shan't have any more trouble from the Blandishes, None of them seems to be genuinely sorry and they're all a bad lot. I should have told you that he was particularly angry about the way in which Sentence made them try to empty the well. Apparently the pump broke when they were getting the level of the water down."

"David knows all about pumps," Peter laughed. "Ask him to tell us why the pump wouldn't work."

"Dad knows, of course. It's something to do with atmospheric pressure and a pump like they had can draw water only to a depth of about thirty feet. The only way they could have done it was to build a wooden stage inside the well and lower themselves and the pump on to it. Then they'd have probably fallen in if they'd tried to pump. I am right, aren't I, Dad?"

Mr. Morton nodded. "Something like that, David. We'll look it up when we get back home. There's our story then, Miss Whiteflower, and may every other story for you work out as happily as this one. Now we must all go, but some of us will come and see you tomorrow. You'll let your solicitors know

about the necklace at once, won't you, and please put it in the bank as soon as you can. Come on, Lone Piners. Bed for you all."

The party broke up. The Harmans went first and Tom went down to the Post Office in Boy Blue with them. Mrs. Harman had not said a word beyond a conventional greeting and "Good night" while in the cottage, but the moment she got outside she talked as if she would never stop, and Jenny felt that she and Tom were a little more in favour with her than usual.

"You'll always be welcome here, Tom," Mr. Harman said. "Come over again as soon as you can and maybe your uncle would have Jenny over for a few days, when he begins the harvest. We'd welcome that, wouldn't we, my dear?"

Mrs. Harman, standing on her doorstep, looked steadily at Tom and back to her husband.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ingles are very kind," she said slowly. "If Jen is asked, of course she'll go. Good night, Tom. I've enjoyed seeing the diamonds. And just fancy, it was our Jenny who found them! Don't be long, Jenny."

So Mr. and Mrs. Harman went indoors leaving Tom and Jenny on the step in the moonlight. Although they were both surprised by Mrs. Harman's change of mood - she had never been so polite to Tom before - they were too tired to say much, and Mr. Morton's car was only a few minutes behind. As he pulled up on the opposite side of the street Peter leaned from the open window and called softly, "Come on, Tom. Get into the back with us although really there's no room... 'Bye, Jenny. See you soon. Go and see Nicky tomorrow and we'll ring you up if we decide to go to Seven Gates again."

"Ring me anyway," Jenny said as she ran across the road. "I want to know what you're all going to do and anyway I may be going to Ingles soon,"

"Come soon, then," David said drowsily.

"Come to Witchend and sleep on the sofa," Mr. Morton said. "The twins would invite you, too, but they're asleep. Mrs. Morton has always said

you're welcome any time and I'm sure she'd like you to come and find some diamonds for us."

"Thank you very much," Jenny said. "What about you, Tom? Would you like me to come?"

Tom opened the door and squeezed into the rear seat next to Peter.

"Yes, Jen. We'd like you to come. Place isn't the same without you."

Mr. Morton let in the clutch and the car moved forward. Jenny stood in the middle of the road suddenly feeling ridiculously happy. She raised her hand as Tom leaned from the window and waved. She thought she heard him call, "Come soon," but couldn't be sure. As the red rear lights of the car vanished over the brow of the hill the cry of the peewit came back to her quite clearly.

Only Tom could whistle like that.

THE END